THE PRESENT POSITION

Brian Mills

As secretary of Counties Evangelistic Work for 14 years, Brian Mills gained an intimate knowledge of many Brethren churches, particularly in the more southerly counties of England. With Graham Brown, he wrote the report, "The Brethren" Today *(Paternoster Press). Latterly he has worked with the Evangelical Alliance, currently co-ordinating its departments of Evangelism and Prayer and Revival.*

Introduction

Because of the rather ad hoc way in which information is gleaned from Brethren churches, there is nothing substantial to draw on since the report "*The Brethren*" *Today* (1980). This paper, therefore, will represent impressions and opinions rather than facts. It will also reflect the observations of those who move among the more open minded Brethren churches, and therefore the picture can only be representative of half of the open Brethren churches at the most.

Background

A better understanding of the present position may be obtained by looking again at "*The Brethren*" *Today* and at the CBRF review entitled *Leadership in the Churches* (1980). More recent contributions in *Harvester* (1985) by Neil Summerton on 'Shepherding the Flock' and by Harold Rowdon on 'Who are the Brethren?', are also to be recommended.

In the past four years my own ministry has been in a wider field. Prior to that I had personal knowledge of up to 100 Brethren churches in which I used to speak in a year, and through the extensive contact I had with evangelists and those associated with different kinds of evangelistic work. Since joining the Evangelical Alliance, I visit no more that 10 Brethren churches a year. Therefore I view myself as a kind of consultant—that is one who does the consulting of others who are still what might be termed 'general practitioners' exercising their ministry principally among Brethren churches. I asked a number of them the following questions:

1. In the past 5 years what significant changes have you noticed in Brethren church life in relation to growth or decline, leadership, youth work, charismatic renewal, small group ministry etc?
2. Has the recent emphasis, large and small, on evangelism, significantly affected Brethren churches? Did the training on offer, the emphasis on prayer and the fruits from the preaching bring qualitative or quantitative growth?
3. In your estimation what are the current strengths within Brethren churches, and the glaring weaknesses?
4. What lessons should Brethren learn from contemporary church experience in other traditions?
5. Do you wish to make any other comments, in summary, about current Brethren church life, particularly in relation to full-time ministry?

The structure of my paper reflects these concerns and answers, although not in the same order in which the questions were posed.

Church Life in General

Positive

Over the past five years, an acceleration of full-time ministry has taken place. Attention must be paid to the fact that in 75% of the churches involved in the Brown-Pearce survey, growth of some kind has been experienced. A small but growing number of churches are prepared to move ahead with changes and new ideas, as the Spirit leads, and the Word guides. For them tradition is not a debilitating factor. Coupled with this is a willingness to develop wider association with other evangelicals and break out of a fortress mentality. This has brought exposure to what God is doing in other branches of his church.

The foregoing factors have resulted in a lessening of the ties with traditional Brethrenism. The more open-minded churches are getting more open in attitude and less recognizable as being in the 'Brethren' mould. Some are positively moving towards a position where they guard their independence to such an extent as to eschew 'denominational' links. They want to be more of the church to the community and less of an expression of one denomination. If this trend continues, it will radically change the face of Brethren churches in the future. The traditionalists will become less and less sympathetic towards the more open until each are isolated from the other.

Meanwhile the more open will continue to find more fellowship with evangelical or charismatic congregations regardless of their denominational persuasion. They will continue to express their 'autonomy' which will put them much more in the free, non-aligned camp of many churches, particularly those which are coming into being as a result of the planting or the emerging of new churches. Inevitably, it seems to me, the remaining

Brethren churches will lose the open flexible reputation Brethren used to have, and become a collection of fellowships, loosely structured, hidebound in tradition, making little or no impact on the world, and therefore not producing growth. A. N. Groves described an apostate church as one 'where no souls are converted under the *public* ministrations' and 'where Christ doth not manifest Himself among them in their *public* character'.

The charismatic movement has profoundly affected assemblies. Whilst many who have experienced renewal themselves have left Brethren churches and are conspicuous by their presence as leaders in other churches, particularly the house church movement, there is, nevertheless, a small but not insignificant number of Brethren churches that still consider themselves within the circle of the Brethren although they have embraced certain practices associated with the charismatic movement. These churches seem to be growing—some dramatically so. The point has been made that, alongside other positive trends, this actually tends to deepen the crisis of identity among Brethren churches.

Among the strengths identified were that Brethren still retain a fundamental biblicism. Potentially the stress on open worship and body life is healthy, even though the outworking of that potential leaves a lot to be desired. Another strength would be the continued good measure of lay participation.

These trends are to be found strongly present in many other church groups and are therefore less distinctive of Brethren churches. The same is true of plural leadership.

Negatives

Nothing stands still in life, but many fellowships have. Little has changed over many years. But for the loyalty of older members, more would have closed down long ago than have done so.

Declining numbers and vision

The decline of numbers noticed in most Brethren churches and evidenced by a drop in income to most Brethren causes, continues. The old are dying, but the young are not coming in. On the contrary, the continued loss of potential leaders is putting the future leadership of many Brethren churches seriously at risk. A lot of young people, after exposure to wider fellowships at college, move into other evangelical circles once they graduate. Others move out of Brethren churches from sheer frustration. In addition there is still a failure of elders in the older age bracket to prepare the younger for eldership or to make way for them to take on responsibility whilst they have ideas, vision, enthusiasm and energy.

Stagnation, too, is as much a reflection of decline as is noticeable, numerical decrease.

Division
One constantly hears of continuing sagas of division so that one moderate, well-respected brother commented, 'in our area the Brethren churches are being decimated by division'. Personality clashes seem to be the cause more often than biblical differences. Charismatic renewal tends to be blamed for much of the divisiveness—although in many cases it is more the intolerance of the older towards the younger, or vice versa, that is at the root.

Doctrinaire outlook
There continues to be a hard-line attitude in the more traditional circles towards charismatic renewal, cooperation with other evangelicals, the role of women, and new developments in evangelism. One correspondent commented, 'quite a few assemblies seem to suffer from an awful sectarianism which I think is the greatest weakness of the movement these days'. That sectarianism is often associated with a closed mind, complacency, isolationism, rigidity, inadequate leadership, and resistance to change in respect of structures, worship, teaching and youth activities.

Specific deficiencies
What was once seen to be one of the Brethren's strongest points—knowledge of the scriptures, and the ability to teach and preach it now seems to be one of its glaring weaknesses, particularly in the inability to apply biblical teaching to life today. Not only is the quality of teaching available to most fellowships far from satisfactory or from being satisfying (*reflected to some extent in the desire for a more settled ministry*), but I also detect that there seems little of that hunger and thirst after God and the knowledge of his word which is surely needed if that weakness is to be overcome. The average church member has never been helped to think biblically about . . . change.

Other deficiencies include not only a slowness to introduce house groups into church life, but a distinct unwillingness to do so. This slowness may be seen as a reaction to the emergence of house fellowships and house churches, or a fear of cliques, or a fear that the door will be opened to the ministry of women. Groups may be seen as a potential threat to the leadership of elders/oversights, who are sometimes unwilling to face up to the need of having an open mind on things biblical. Many seem to live in perpetual fear of saying anything or doing anything to upset the proverbial applecart. Where there is a likelihood therefore, of 'precious truths' being challenged, or present practices being questioned, or of

honest debate, or of differing opinions—the risk must not be taken. House groups, with their greater informality, are the ideal forum for such things to happen, so are seen as too much of a threat and therefore not to be encouraged. Such a reaction, it should be noted, is based not on biblical grounds, but on pragmatism. Even those churches which do have house groups generally run them like a normal church Bible study, which fails to capitalize on the dynamic of the small group. Some churches would do better to meet in homes since their numerical size is more suited to a home group than to a church congregation. In other churches, home groups are one of the major factors contributing to both qualitative and quantitative growth.

Youth work, generally regarded as one of the Brethren's strong points, is now seen to be a weakness since, as one correspondent commented, 'we are probably a long way behind in this area, particularly in reaching non-Christian youngsters'.

There seems little or no strategy for growth, nor for church planting (apart from a few evangelists) and relatively little in the sharing of resources between fellowships. A failure to develop a doctrine of differences leaves the door open for the devil to sow his seeds of discord and to continue to bring division. A failure, too, to grasp the nettle concerning the ministry of women—sometimes known as the silent majority—prolongs the winter of female discontent and furthermore restricts the use of gifts God has given for the building up of his body.

Evangelism

The 1980 report, "*The Brethren*" *Today*, revealed that 75% of all Brethren churches claim that preaching the gospel/evangelism/obtaining conversions was one of the top three aims of fellowship—it was by far the most prominent aim. When we look at the involvement and effect of Mission England and Mission to London on Brethren churches, the view has been expressed that those major missions did not affect Brethren churches nearly as much as they ought to have done. Yet twenty years ago the Brethren were one of the most conspicuous groups of churches in terms of involvement and support for Billy Graham's visit.

Despite the fact that leading evangelists and businessmen from the Brethren were prominently involved in leadership at regional and national level, the general impression is that too few availed themselves of the very real benefits to be gained from the wealth of training on offer as part of the missions. Can it be that, characteristically, Brethren are suspicious of training? Quite a few Brethren churches were late in taking advantage of the events, and because they were not involved in all the component parts they did not benefit as fully as some other churches. (Many other churches

not only saw their congregations double as a result of referrals from the stadium meetings in 1984 but have also seen more come to Christ in the year since).

However, some of the trainers were experienced evangelists from the Brethren. They gained a great deal from their involvement in all aspects of the training—church growth, nurture group training, counsellor training —and in relation to post-mission courses. Therefore, the know-how and experience is available to be used by Brethren churches, provided they recognize the need for training.

Those Brethren churches that did fling their weight into all the components of the mission—the prayer, the training, the evangelism—have benefited enormously. As might be expected, they were of the more open persuasion who were willing to cooperate with Christians from other branches of the church in England.

Full-time Ministry

As we are particularly concerned with the role and function of full-time ministries within our churches, I want to give special attention to that subject.

During the past ten years the development of full-time ministry has been one of the most radical changes to have affected Brethren churches in England. Ten years ago there were comparatively few instances of local churches with experience of full-time ministry of any kind. I knew of one each in London, Barnstaple, the Blackdown Hills and Bristol. Other experience of full-time ministries was related to individuals whom God had used to plant new churches and who, for a while, stayed with the congregation that they helped to bring into being. My impression is that there are now between 100 and 150 Brethren churches who have had experience of a full-time worker being attached to them for the bulk of his ministry. (I hope that eventually we can get rid of the term 'full-time worker' which may psychologically give a wrong impression of the true view of their worth). Many saw the appointment of a full-time 'minister' as a panacea for many or all of their local church ills, even if that was not articulated at the time. Not a few sought for a FTW because they were small, lacking direction and were in something of a spiritual backwater, whilst some had thought through carefully and prayerfully the reasons for wanting a resident FTW.

The reasons

The reasons that I would give for this development, although not in order of importance, are as follows:

1. A 'backs to the wall' mentality where survival was the main objective.
2. An awareness that pastoral and evangelistic needs appear to be neglected.
3. A reaction to anti-clerisy may have subconsciously contributed towards openness to full-time ministry.
4. The emergence of church growth teaching which emphasised the importance of full-time ministry as a major contributory factor to the growth of a local church.
5. The increasing isolationism of churches, coupled with a decreasing access to itinerant ministry and a decline in the quality and relevance of teaching given, made many hungry for something better.
6. The Spirit of God's leading in the church in general, bringing about both plurality of leadership, and the identification of full-time ministry.
7. The report "*The Brethren*" *Today* no doubt helped to accelerate the trend. Often fear of what others think paralyses fellowships from action that they feel desirable. This report, however, showed that 9% already had FTWs and that over a third thought it a good idea for a church to have a full-time pastor or evangelist.

Most of the above reasons—and there are no doubt more—were underlying ones that may not have been articulated. The crisis of leadership has been well talked about for years. The evidence of that crisis is that, because of demanding responsibilities in secular employment, those who are in positions of leadership as elders find that there is little or no time to give to the pastoral and evangelistic needs of the flock.

How it developed

Once interest in full-time ministry began to emerge it was obvious that there was little or no experience to draw on. The lack of denominational structure, coupled with the decline of itinerant ministries which often resulted in useful cross-fertilising of ideas and information, meant that not too much was known about what was happening. However, the experience of Counties Evangelistic Work, who had been tentatively moving towards the practice of evangelists spending at least half their time in fellowship with one local church, as well as having wider responsibility for evangelism, coupled with the regional fellowship structure that CEW had established, meant that they were in a unique position to do some of the cross-fertilising and to be a resource. Some of their evangelists had been used to plant new churches and their experience of full-time ministry in that context helped. Soon, more and more of the existing churches with full-time ministries were identified. Publicity in magazines through articles and the sharing of information helped the thinking to develop.

The resources

These tended to be very much ad hoc. Certain individuals, because of

their experience in the circles in which they moved, became the points of contact. For example, Dr. Rowdon at London Bible College and Dr. Copley at Moorlands Bible College were able to point Brethren based students in the direction of churches which they individually knew were looking for FTWs. Robert Scott-Cook in Bristol, because of the way in which he and others had successfully married their ministries to local churches, became a very helpful and worthwhile sounding board for opinion. The editors of *Echoes of Service* were aware of missionaries returning to this country to stay, and some of these were experienced enough in a local church ministry to be in demand by churches at home. Because my role at that time as General Secretary of Counties Evangelistic Work meant that I was in a position to know what was going on, I found it necessary to start a referral service to link individuals with churches. I notice, too, that the UK 'Aware' section of *Harvester* magazine has recently entered the field and offered its services to help link opportunity with manpower.

The linking service that I ran personally was, in my opinion, not used enough to make it as effective as it might have been. My impression is that few found what they were looking for through the introduction service that I ran. Most seem to find their manpower or their local church independently.

Lessons to learn

Just over three years ago it became obvious, from the experience that some churches were having with FTWs, that some guidance was necessary for those who are still considering the possibility. So I put together a series of questions and comments (see appendix). Those questions were subsequently reprinted in *Harvester*. Because most churches have very little background to go on, and no experience to learn from, a lot of mistakes have been made and a lot of heartache caused. One full-timer in a local church has described the process in these terms: 'The honeymoon is followed by the nightmare, and then by the reality.'

It is clear that some local churches have rushed into the appointment of a resident FTW without giving enough detailed, careful thought about all the implications. Many are concerned about the casualty rate, from all points of view. A few churches have thought through the implications of what they are looking for and have encapsulated that in a job specification. They have allocated a percentage of time for different functions within the fellowship, and have, in some cases, allowed opportunity for their full-timer to exercise a wider ministry for part of his time. On the other hand some fellowships were looking for something on the cheap—little or nothing was offered in the way of regular financial remuneration and

housing was seldom made available. The kind of person they were looking for, it seems, was one who would be in the same kind of position with the fellowship as a caretaker—in that he was expected to be at everyone's beck and call.

A vital area where not enough thought had been given was in relation to authority—in whom was it to be vested? Little thought had been given to what *position* a full-timer needed to occupy in relation to the eldership. Whilst we may maintain that position is not so important as function, nevertheless if a person is given a vital function in the fellowship he may inevitably be looked up to as 'the leader'. This presents an obvious threat for those who occupy a position of leadership and who may not be functioning as such.

Some viewed the appointment in an employment context, opening the door to all the dangers of a 'paid ministry' where the emphasis is on the 'paid' rather than on the 'ministry'. Others, recognising the need for their man to be able to function as part of the body and to be committed to the church and the church committed to him, saw him as part of the leadership team. So his successes and failures were theirs also. In that way the full-timer was less likely to be either a 'messiah' or a 'scape-goat'.

Where a full-timer has been recognised from the start as a catalyst for continuing change and has become one of the 'eldership', questions of 'authority' have not been such a problem. There has been a willingness to change and to share in the decision-making that gives rise to change. Of course some FTWs were appointed with a limited brief—as, for example, a youth worker. Even though he may not be identified as part of the leadership 'body', he needs regular opportunity to share his heart with the local church leaders.

Conclusion

We need to learn again from scripture and to hear again from God. What does scripture teach us about leadership, authority and service? How did Jesus keep the balance between being Master, Lord and Servant? Can we learn anything about full-time ministry, and particularly paid ministry, from the teaching of Jesus, the sending of the 12 and the 70, the experience of Paul both as an itinerant and as a resident (in Corinth and Ephesus) and also from the experience of the early church? And what is the Spirit saying to the church *today*? What is he wanting to prepare us for? Is he just concerned to maintain the status quo, or is he wanting an explosion of growth? Pragmatism and expediency, compromise and conciliation; these are the terms that are more often associated with decision making in the world today and alas, also in the church. What is needed are men of God, able to hear from God what the Spirit is saying to

the churches. Then the leadership that is given—both full-time and part-time—will be seen as prophetic and pastoral. Prophetic in the sense that God always sees beyond what we can see, therefore we need his mind and will mediated into our circumstances. Pastoral in the sense that God also sees what we need, therefore we need his love to enable the body to be his body to build one another up and to move forward where he leads.

APPENDIX

STATEMENT TO HELP LOCAL CHURCHES THINK THROUGH FULL-TIME MINISTRY

Dear Friends,
Having had the opportunity during the past few years to test the information given, there are some questions I would like to put that may help you in discovering the person of God's choice.

a) Is there someone in your fellowship who could take early retirement, or withdraw from secular work to concentrate on your perceived needs? Or is there someone (in whom the church has confidence) in other full-time ministry, that could be given a Macedonian call?

b) Is your church, as a body of Christians, committed to the concept of having a full-time worker? Are they prepared for the sacrifice involved, the changes that will most surely be needed, and the growth that should occur as a direct outcome of a successful appointment?

c) Have you clearly perceived the work that you anticipate a potential full-time worker is needed for and the role he/she should fulfil? Those seeking for an opening do want to know from the leaders what they are concerned to see done, in specific terms—even down to percentages of time to be spent in different activities. A form of job description should be prepared.

d) Do you envisage the incoming worker being in the eldership—either from the start or subsequently? If not, in what way is his leadership to be recognised by the fellowship in a way that will not be viewed as a threat to yours? How will his ideas and initiatives have an opportunity to be implemented harmoniously? Will he be seen as part of the team responsible for decision making and able to benefit from mutual care?

e) Have you worked out realistically the church's ability to support the worker? If this cannot be guaranteed in toto by the fellowship, are there specific proposals that you can make to such a worker to help him 'make up the balance' financially? Is there, for example, any prospect of your co-operating with a nearby fellowship(s) so that a man's time and gifts are shared?

f) What role do you perceive for the wife of a married full-time male?

Most of these questions are the ones that potential full-time workers expect the church to be able to answer when they meet for discussion about the way forward.

May I ask, from your experience so far, if there are questions that I should incorporate into the full-time workers' questionnaire, or that you would like put to them in general terms in advance of your meeting, to help them be prepared for the situation they might face in serving the Lord full-time among you?

Please note there seems to be no demand for a part-time appointment—at least from those who have been in touch with me over the past 3 years.

I look forward to hearing from you. Any comments you can make to help a

better service to be given will be appreciated. May I say that because of the increasing demand, the service is also becoming quite costly for me to handle privately. It costs me approximately £1 in administration for each individual that is introduced to you by correspondence, whether or not direct contact is subsequently made. I hope you don't mind my mentioning this matter.

With Christian greetings,

Yours sincerely,

Brian R. Mills