# Square Pegs in Round Holes: Problem Based Learning in Training for Service in the Brethren
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## Introduction

In theory, the nature of the Brethren movement means that it ought to be highly flexible and therefore open to combining external, "formally" trained workers with internally developed volunteers. In practice, in spite of many efforts there continues to be considerable tension between these two sources of church support within the Brethren system. This would appear to be especially the case in countries where the movement has a longer history and so has developed unwritten "traditions" that can become a serious impediment to the successful integration of the two streams of potential church service. A serious lack of formal structures within the local congregation also militates against the effective harnessing of both these channels of ministry in a fruitful manner.

## The Problem

Formal Bible College style training can be very effective in preparing an individual for service within an open and flexible congregation where the leadership has a clear vision. However, given the fact that fellowships of this nature are more likely to be positive about formally training men and women for service they may already be linked into placement programmes for students. This reinforces a tendency which means that more needy congregations are isolated from the process. Potential students are likely to experience a positive church environment, therefore, before they actually encounter the reality of service in a congregation that has had little or no structured links with the training process itself. Those running placement programmes naturally want their students to have "positive" experiences which also intensifies this general tendency. In effect, the system ends up merely supporting fellowships that are already flourishing and isolating those that need help but which do not have the experience or structures to work successfully with externally trained individuals.

Internally "trained" workers within the Brethren system have the advantage of a detailed knowledge of local "traditions". They understand the internal tensions within the congregation they are connected to which are unspoken but very real. They are also aware of the network of relationships within the official and unofficial power structures of the fellowship. They are also likely to be linked into the system of relationships with other Brethren fellowships in the area. Normally, their "training" will have been informal, largely based upon experience inside

the local church and across nearby congregations of a similar ilk. Crucially, much of the knowledge of such a worker will have been gathered almost intuitively, through years of experience of worshipping within a local church. Tension generated by a simple lack of mutual understanding is highly likely, therefore, between an internally produced worker and an externally trained one; and the inevitable result could be competition and conflict partly because their experience of "training" has been so different even if their theology is similar.

Formal training can be very effective in giving individuals a good theological and biblical foundation and even in providing an understanding of what a healthy fellowship might look like. However, it is less effective in preparing potential church workers for service in the congregations that need the help they could offer but which lack structures for effectively receiving it. The result can be frustration for the externally trained worker and additional frustration for the leadership which recruited him or her. In effect, everything depends upon individuals in this system and if relationships fail then there may be little chance of any lasting spiritual fruit. A crucial weakness for the student trained in a Bible College model is his or her lack of access to the intuitive, experience-based model of the internally produced full-time worker which is the vital foundation for such a person's ministry and offers him a security that an externally trained worker may never have.

**Possible Answers**
We could start by stating that it may be that there are no answers to this problem. Many would argue this: the point being that congregations that are locked into their own traditions and do not wish to change (even though they may say that they are!) should be left to die and the focus ought to be upon those that are already organised to receive external help or upon completely new "pioneering" works where traditions and unspoken rules are not an issue. This is in effect what is already happening in many areas. However, even in new works or flexible congregations many of the problems that we have identified do exist or will do so in the future and therefore training that does not take account of this reality is deficient.

One crucial point to make at the outset is that students who have been brought up within the Brethren or who have come to Christ through the movement have a major advantage over those who have not. Such individuals at least have had some exposure to the intuitive, experience - based "training" system which will give them an understanding of Brethren distinctives when it comes to church dynamics. Even so, if they

are not returning to their "home" fellowship for service they will still encounter major challenges in their new church (if it is Brethren) because although they may be aware of the existence of unofficial "traditions" they will not have detailed knowledge of them.

A second point would obviously be to intensify training being offered to those who are already serving within congregations. In many ways, this could be seen as an ideal solution. These individuals know their churches and the existing problems and may already be accepted within their own congregations. Experience reveals, sadly, that workers of this kind often have an interest in maintaining existing structures that may already be failing. Alternatively, while their external training may identify weaknesses in their home church it most likely will not equip them to harness their knowledge of existing unofficial church networks to implement change.

In effect, we are still left with how to prepare people for the specific Brethren challenges that so often frustrate capable and sincere young workers who are genuinely keen to serve but who often end up in other denominations where they go on to fruitful ministries. Problems such as unwritten church tradition which is denied but clearly exists, unspoken "rules" founded upon family positions within the church, shifting authority within the eldership, no existing formal structure for an externally appointed church worker and an inability to receive new families into what are sometimes "closed systems" of networked relationships are amongst many of the issues that students must be prepared for.

What this very brief and undeniably superficial analysis has revealed is that giving students access to what I have called the intuitive, experience-based model of learning would be a great assistance to them given the nature of Brethren ecclesiology and its development. There is no question that it has often been the mainstay of the development of full-time workers in the Brethren in the past. How could this be done in a more formal model of training? Placements could be extended, of course, but we have already seen some of the weaknesses of this system. A reversion to the past and a rejection of all formal training is not the answer given the evident need for more structured training across the movement except where this is rejected along theological lines.

**Problem Based Learning**
One possible answer may be a far greater emphasis upon what is sometimes called Problem Based Learning (PBL). The advantage of PBL

for preparing individuals for service in churches of a Brethren persuasion is that it naturally encourages individuals to think through how to apply theoretical knowledge to differing but specific scenarios. Given that the Brethren are notorious for their lack of structure, such a learning process, if executed effectively, could enable students to begin to develop some of the "intuition" that full-time workers gain over years of experience. PBL also crucially should develop a personal, spiritual and relational subtlety in students that the Brethren movement demands of all its church workers without this ever being written on any job description!

PBL is normally based around presenting students with specific, quite detailed scenarios and then challenging them to consider what they would do in such circumstances. Given the particular challenges faced by those working in many Brethren churches, as already outlined, this approach has much to commend it. Moreover, a carefully constructed PBL module has the added advantage of being open to many different facilitators and could also attract those who might not be open to other types of formal training. Even more useful, such material could be used to help churches to prepare for recruiting a full-time worker and its approach might even make it more acceptable to many elders. The key to effective PBL methods is that they be taken seriously both by the students and the teachers. There must be clear guidelines about what is expected from answers and marking must be shown to be rigorous and fair. Finally, it cannot be stressed enough that the success of a PBL module depends upon the quality and the variety of the scenarios presented to the students.

In order to demonstrate the possible value of a PBL approach to training I have included a number of scenarios below which come from my own personal knowledge and experience of church work over the years.

**Scenario 1** – a pioneered church plant run along Brethren lines but dependent upon the personal vision and drive of one individual. After about 5 years there is a secure fellowship and the 3 elders agree that help is needed from a younger individual in a full-time capacity to oversee the young people's work and build links with the community. The pioneer of the fellowship says he is fully in agreement with taking on a new worker but the entire church looks to him as its founder and leader. Outline the potential problems that the new worker would face and the strategies that he or she would need to make their role a success. How could the pioneer himself be trained for this development and what should he do to make the new initiative a success?

**Scenario 2** – Fellowship situated on the edge of an urban estate. Professionally capable elders see the need for full time workers to reach the younger families in the community. A wealthy member buys a property which can be used by the church worker and a young couple is recruited who both decided to serve part time to fill one complete full-time position. Initially, progress is good and new connections are made with the community. However, tensions emerge when professionally minded elders seek to apply secular principles in their mentoring of the church workers so that time sheets and targets for numbers of new contacts or members are imposed. How should the church workers deal with this? What does this development reveal about the elders?

**Scenario 3** – A fellowship about 100 years old which has undergone very few internal changes for the past 40 years. The church gradually lost most of its younger families over the last 15 years and no students returned after leaving for university. The dominant elder recruits a church worker as he sees the need for a gifted outsider to lead the church forward before it slips into terminal decline. The older members are not generally comfortable with the concept of a full-time church worker and see it as a betrayal of biblical principles. There is very little evangelism and the congregation is isolated from the community around it. The leading elder gives the church worker authority to make changes and supports these which are effective; but then he suddenly leaves. How can this situation be handled by the church worker and the elders and the church? What are the most likely outcomes and why?

**Scenario 4** – A church employing its first full-time church worker in a preaching, teaching and evangelistic role on a fixed term contract. The church worker is one of the elders but was appointed from outside of the fellowship. One of the other elders decides that he is being called by the Lord to serve full-time. This elder has been with the church for many years and is very well linked in to the other Brethren churches in the area and has a close friendship with one of the other elders. How should the church worker respond and how ought the elders to handle this situation? What do you think is most likely to happen and why? Is a positive outcome for the church itself possible?

**Scenario 5** – An established fellowship with a long tradition of effective evangelism within the community and visionary elders. A full-time church worker served in the congregation for about 10 years and then stepped down. He remained within the fellowship. His role had been largely pastoral and he was not gifted evangelistically, but he was greatly loved by the people. The elders appoint a new church worker whom they

call "pastor" to focus on evangelism. This individual is very different. He builds good links within the community and brings new people into the services; but he clashes with the former worker and is not liked by the greater majority of the church. He is not gifted pastorally and does not come from a Brethren background. Rumours start to emerge that about 40 members are going to leave the fellowship. What could be done to help the previous worker and the new one to build a positive relationship? How can this potential split be averted?

**Scenario 6** – Elders in an inner-city congregation realise that the future of their fellowship is in doubt since they have few young people and no young families. However, they have an excellent building and own properties either side of it. Moreover, the area around these buildings has become almost entirely Muslim. The elders wish to work with or appoint a full-time worker who could help them to reach the Muslim population and provide a future for their fellowship. What should a potential worker say and do if they were considering such a role? How could they prepare for such a role? What should they consider which might make them conclude that it would be unwise to even enter into negotiations with the elders concerned? What advice would you give to the elders?

**Scenario 7** – A successful and vibrant fellowship has previously recruited two external workers to help lead the congregation along with a large group of elders. However, in both cases the appointments ended badly. In the first case, the individual concerned had a reported breakdown and in the second the person only lasted 9 months before leaving. The church is advertising again and the package they are offering is generous financially and appears well thought out. The church itself runs a successful project reaching unemployed young people. How would you advise a potential candidate to proceed if they were genuinely sensing that the Lord might be calling them to this fellowship? Why might you counsel them to not even consider the position?

**Scenario 8** – After a year the full-time outreach community worker in a Brethren fellowship begins to sense that a conflict is developing within the eldership which recruited him. He is not himself an elder but is called to elders' meetings when his role is discussed, which is normally about once every two months. It gradually becomes clear that the conflict is centred around two elders and involves the role of women in the church. The community worker's wife is a very gifted speaker and is closely linked with the efforts and views of one of these two elders. There is talk within the congregation of two parties emerging within the church and some individuals have already complained to the community worker

about his wife being too "pushy". What should the community outreach worker do and not do, in your opinion? Why is his position so insecure and difficult?

**Scenario 9** – A young woman is appointed to energise the youth work in a medium sized congregation. The elders are very supportive and for 18 months both the youth worker and the church are extremely encouraged by what is happening. However, in her ministry with non-Christian young people she starts to attract former drug addicts and prostitutes into the youth group. Parents of some of the children complain to the elders about this and they ask the youth worker to stop inviting such individuals to the youth group. She is horrified and also discouraged. Meanwhile, one of the parents, who is related to an elder takes over responsibility for the youth work and the elders direct the youth worker to focus on evangelism alone outside of the fellowship which they recommend should be linked into a Christian community centre started by another church. What should the youth worker do? How would you evaluate the response of the elders?

**Scenario 10** – A Brethren church has employed a full-time teaching and preaching elder from outside of the fellowship. His teaching is greatly appreciated by the members but his daughter has serious behavioural problems which means that she makes a lot of noise in some services. Many older people complain to the elders about this girl and also to the mother, who is very offended by the nature of the complaints and the lack of understanding and love behind them. Eventually, the issue is raised formally in an elders' meeting where it is stated that the girl is making it very hard for people to concentrate in the Breaking of Bread service. What should the full-time elder say in the meeting and what should he do after it? How would you advise the elders?

**Conclusion**
PBL could possibly help to alleviate a serious challenge to training in the Brethren context. Given the lack of structure and the inevitable reliance upon unwritten conventions in many Brethren fellowships, PBL can equip individuals more effectively to deal with these potential challenges. Moreover, PBL could potentially harness the advantages of the traditional intuitive, experience-based model of training to the more formal training methods of institutions. Finally, a greater use of this model could potentially make future students more able to assist traditional fellowships which might not otherwise consider external full-time help.