

Fan the Flame

Developing gift and leadership for the local
church

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**Developing gift and leadership for the local
church**

Neil Summerton

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Brethren Educational Network

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1
1. Background influences	3
2. The question of principle	9
3. Making disciples	13
4. Developing spiritual gifts	17
5. Training and developing local church leaders	21
6. Training and developing staff workers	31
7. Strengthening theological (Biblical) competence	33
Conclusion	35

Introduction

The need to develop and train leaders for local churches in the coming decades is of paramount importance. This booklet underlines the need. It also makes specific suggestions about the content and organisation of development and training programmes. In doing so, it challenges those who now lead congregations, and those who have influence at the inter-congregational level, to take urgent steps to ensure that local churches will continue to have high-quality leadership in a rapidly-changing, demanding environment.

It is particularly concerned with the special needs of churches of an Open Brethren background, including churches which no longer regard themselves as such. They are the primary focus. Nevertheless, the analysis and proposals are very likely to be applicable to varying extents in other independent churches, whether those of a classical Evangelical variety or in the charismatic New Churches. The prescription may not be useless, either, in more centralised denominations, particularly as they tend to become, in practice, more congregational in their polity and as they seek to introduce a greater degree of 'lay' ministry into their churches. No apology is necessary, however, for rooting the analysis and proposals in the experience of the group of churches for which this booklet is primarily intended: the argument will be all the more powerful for that.

The original impulse to prepare the texts which now, in modified form, make up this booklet was provided by an invitation to speak in Malaysia in September 2003, at the bi-annual Assembly Leaders Conference and to the Klang Valley assemblies. I thank those concerned for the invitation, for the stimulus which their topics provided, and for their wonderful and refreshing hospitality.

1

Church leadership: background influences

In many countries, the character of churches of Open Brethren background is changing rapidly. Those changes are likely to affect still other countries sooner or later. But even those churches in the English-speaking world which find it practically wise to hide their origins and identity are affected, sometimes much more than they are inclined to allow, by those origins. Important aspects of their theology and ecclesiology are determined by what might be described as their 'genetic code'. In my judgment, they are not wise to pretend that the new patterns of 'socialisation' and 'nurture' that they have deliberately adopted can completely obliterate the influence of the genetic code. The rock from which they have been hewn is clearly discernible. This seems to me to be true too in those branches of the New Church movement whose ecclesiology has been deeply influenced by the Brethren, though of course new emphases are of greater importance among them.

These background influences are particularly relevant to approaches to church leadership.

It is often asserted that, in the past, the Brethren denigrated formal training, particularly academic training, at least in matters relating to Christianity, scripture and the church. Certainly, traditional Brethren argumentation stressed the apostle Paul's specific rejection of worldly wisdom and worldly eloquence. It stressed his assertion, in *1 Corinthians* 1:18 - 2:16, both of the foolishness of the gospel from the human perspective and of the wisdom of the Spirit. On these grounds, some in the Brethren movement, even in recent times, have been suspicious of formal training and preparation. They have argued that, when individuals drew on this training in seeking to understand scripture or in church leadership, they were being fundamentally unspiritual. It is true, too, that early Brethren such as Groves and

Muller rejected formal education and preparation for their ministry. It is also true that Brethren often rejected systematic theology in favour of 'simply believing what scripture plainly teaches' - though they did not thereby free themselves from systematic theology quite so easily, as was demonstrated by their eschatology and ecclesiology and by some highly systematic interpretations of their own, e.g., dispensationalism! For example, in his time, John Nelson Darby was undoubtedly an extremely influential systematic theologian, despite the unsystematic form in which much of his writing was cast.

Nevertheless, there was certainly a strong tradition of what we would now call discipleship training. The tradition rejected decisively the idea that there could be two classes of Christian: on the one hand, a hum-drum set of pew-sitters who had little need of biblical knowledge and spiritual experience, and from whom little Christian work was expected; and, on the other, a limited number of more holy, specially-trained people upon whom the burden of church life and work should fall. Sadly, some churches on the progressive side of the Open Brethren are rapidly moving in this latter direction, the excuse being that people are often too busy for it to be otherwise. Traditionally in the Brethren, however, the expectation was that every Christian should know scripture deeply, that all should have enthusiastic and regular devotional lives, and that all should be active in the Lord's work, particularly in evangelism, Sunday school, youth work and so on.

This was highly laudable and in due course was transmitted to the faith missions and to the Keswick movement.¹ If these expectations are now being eroded by consumerism and by professionalism in the church, more is the pity. But, at the same time, there was no strong tradition of conscious and organised training and development. There were, of course, strong group expectations that every Christian in the fellowship would develop in the ways outlined in the preceding paragraph. There was strong social pressure that each Christian should grow, both as a Christian and in Christian work. But it was expected that this development would be through the ordinary

¹ It would be wrong to regard the approach as unique to the Brethren: it was shared with many others in nineteenth-century Evangelicalism. See Ian Bradley, *The call to seriousness: the Evangelical impact on the Victorians*, London: Jonathan Cape 1976.

activities of the fellowship - through the meetings, including the prayer meeting, the midweek Bible teaching meeting, and the young men's and young women's Bible classes, where they existed. Above all, from conversion onwards, there was much learning by doing - by participation in open worship and conversational Bible studies, by participation in evangelism, especially in open-air meetings, and in children's and youth work.

There was certainly no emphasis on skills training and development. There was little or no teaching on how to teach children in Sunday school, on how to preach, or on how to study the Bible (one just read it a lot - no bad thing in itself, of course). There was no teaching on biblical interpretation. And so on.

There was, moreover, certainly no preparation for the tasks of eldership. The emphasis was on appointing those who were 'already doing the work of an elder', those who were already giving evidence of having both the gifts and the skills needed. They were expected to develop further by continuing in the work. But the deduction was that it was not necessary for elders to have any training or programmes of development. Nor is it clear that anyone gave much thought to whether such preparation was either necessary or possible. And learning from experience was a matter for the individual.

If this is a caricature, it is by no means extreme. The reader must judge how far these attitudes prevail today in their particular country and culture.

This outline of the traditional approach is not the whole story, however. Whatever may have been the attitudes of Groves and Muller (which, it might be argued, related specifically to education for ministry in the holy orders of the Established Church), the fact is that a considerable number of the early Brethren were highly distinguished academically, including in biblical studies. It is necessary to mention only the names of Tregelles, Bellett, Kitto, Newton, and Philip Henry Gosse, as well as Darby, to establish the point.² That tradition

² Some of these, of course, did not hold academic posts but it has been only since the expansion of higher education after 1945 that we think of scholarship as effectively confined to the university. Since this text was first prepared, Timothy Stunt has provided more detail on scholarship in the early Brethren (T.C.F. Stunt, 'John Nelson Darby - the

continued at least within the Open and Glanton Brethren. Over the years, these branches were distinguished by some significant academic names, not only in biblical studies, but also in other disciplines (for example, Rendle Short in surgery and Orton Smith in Japanology). The expansion of higher education after the Second World War saw, under the inspiration of Fred Bruce and Donald Wiseman, the emergence of a significant number of scholars in the field of biblical studies – the present professors of Hebrew in both Oxford and Cambridge are of Brethren background, for example.

This development was perhaps encouraged by the fact that, at the time, full-time church leadership (i.e., the pastorate) was not an option in Brethren churches (at home at least). By contrast, the academic world was a possible avenue for pursuing an interest in biblical studies. Today, the question needs to be asked whether there is an unfortunate decline in interest in biblical and theological studies among those of Brethren background. If there is, it may be attributable not only to the flight of younger people from these churches, but also to the lack of serious biblical teaching in many churches and to the fact that full-time pastoral service in these churches is now an alternative possibility.

If we turn, in this historical survey, from the academic world to the level of the local church, there was not only an expectation of deep knowledge of scripture on the part of the leaders. There was also, for example, in the Scottish coalfields in the 19th and 20th centuries, a tradition of knowledge of the biblical languages among working-class Brethren leaders. This was perhaps encouraged by the longstanding Scottish Presbyterian tradition of universal and egalitarian education.

It is true that the Brethren in the early days did not choose to set up training institutions. In this, they differed from earlier branches of English nonconformity which had established distinguished academies in the eighteenth century, and pastoral training institutions from 1800 onwards. The early Brethren, however, saw no need to train a pastorate. As has been noted already, it was expected that every Christian would develop himself or herself as a useful servant of the Lord. But as the scale of missionary activity grew, embryo missionary

training schools were created for both men and women in the UK in the 1890s. Later, in the 20th century, what is now Moorlands College was a Brethren foundation and the Brethren (particularly Sir John Laing) made an important contribution to the foundation of London Bible College. Brethren personalities were also closely associated with the foundation of Regent College in Vancouver. That neither Moorlands College, nor London Bible College, nor Regent College is now closely connected with the Brethren is a reflection of the non-denominational cast of mind of those Brethren who were involved in the foundational stages.

So far as other countries are concerned, in quite a number there are actual or embryo teaching institutions connected with the Brethren. The most notable in Europe are Wiedenest and the Italian Evangelical Bible Institute, both of which happen also to have close links with the Baptists. The Emmaus movement has been important in many places in creating teaching institutions linked to the Brethren, and now Gospel Literature Outreach is also creating institutions.

It remains the case, however, that in those countries in which Brethren churches are increasingly appointing full-time staff workers, they frequently find themselves obliged to appoint people trained in non-denominational colleges or colleges of other denominations. This is, of course, not undesirable in itself, and cross-fertilisation between church groupings is positively beneficial. But it is a strange circumstance in which a church grouping has to look outside its own circles for virtually all its staff workers.

2

The question of principle

From this account, it can be seen that the Brethren tradition is, in fact, far from one of uniform opposition to theological education and formal training for Christian ministry and leadership. Insofar as Brethrenism is anti-intellectual, it shares this attitude with much of Evangelicalism generally, of course. But in the case of the Brethren (and those affected by its theology, for example, branches of the New Churches), there is a special feature. That is the emphasis on the (theological) notion that the church needs no more for its health and growth than the Spirit and the Word - that spiritual gifts are developed, as well as conferred, entirely by the Spirit without any form of human involvement.

In its most extreme form, this line of reasoning argues that any human contribution to the Lord's work is carnal. Preparation for preaching, for example, is ill-advised: the Lord gives the word in the very moment that it is required, as he promised (with a rather particular circumstance in mind) in *Matthew* 10: 19 & 20. Thus, there is a strong tendency to think that efforts to acquire skills in ministry are carnal and worldly; that they are a work of the flesh rather than the Spirit. What is needed, rather, is spiritual experience and gift. Certainly, classroom learning is a poor substitute for learning on the job by doing the work.

To my mind, this is theologically (i.e., biblically) questionable. It is true, of course, that our knowledge and skills are useless without the presence of the Spirit and the possession of the requisite spiritual gifts; and that skills without the work of the Spirit and spiritual gift are carnal. We should certainly select for eldership those who are displaying the relevant spiritual gifts, and those who are showing aptitude for the office by their present ministry, rather than discovering after appointment that they have neither gift nor aptitude.

Learning by doing is undoubtedly more effective than mere classroom learning.

But there is much in scripture to suggest that the Lord expects us to co-operate with the Spirit in the work which he has given us, and that the Lord makes use of our training and experience (even our secular training and experience) in preparing us to serve him. Thus, Moses was prepared for 80 years, both in Egypt and in the desert, to lead the massive exodus of a whole people. In defeating Goliath, David clearly made use of the technical skill in slinging which he had acquired dealing with the bear and the lion in the commercial business of rearing sheep. Paul evidently made use of the knowledge which he had acquired in both Hebrew and Graeco-Roman learning (including in the school of Gamaliel) before he converted to Christ. He also evidently made use of the preparation and experience which he received in the desert and in Tarsus for a lengthy period after his conversion. And while Peter and John were 'unlearned men', they had been with Jesus (*Acts 4: 13*). In fact, they had benefited from both the synagogue school with its immersion in the text of the Old Testament, and three years in what Jesus and his disciples saw as his rabbinical school. So I would say that, when it comes to preparing us for his service, the Lord makes use of everything in our education, training and experience, and brings this knowledge to life in his service by the power of the Spirit.

If we are serious in our desire to serve the Lord, then surely we should be willing to prepare ourselves as best we can, in order to serve him to the best of our ability. Surely we should make every effort to bring to bear all the experience that the Lord has given us. From the theological perspective, it is not a question of Spirit *or* flesh, but of relying upon the Lord *and* seeking to prepare ourselves. Gift has to be developed, as Paul told Timothy (*2 Tim. 1: 6*). Those who are to succeed us must be taught, as Paul also told Timothy (*2 Tim. 2: 2*). Conscious reflection, both about the intrinsic nature of the task or activity itself, and on personal experience and performance in the activity, plays an important part in this. (It is this conscious reflection on the nature of the task and on our own experience in it, coupled with the determination to improve our performance next time, which is of the essence of effective training programmes.)

Moreover, as our communities, businesses and other organisations

increasingly develop a training culture, people's expectation will be that they ought to receive training for the tasks which we are expecting them to perform. Against that background, congregations simply will not tolerate incompetent leadership. So there are both theological and cultural reasons why we should be improving training and development, both at the level of the local church and at the supra-church level.

3

Making disciples

We perennially underestimate the depth and extent to which Enlightenment and Romantic secularism, now in post-modernist form, conditions the thought of virtually everyone in the West. Harry Blamires was far from expressing an entirely original thought when he wrote of the need to develop a Christian mind, that is, a world-view and ethics based on a truly biblical understanding. The early Brethren would certainly have seen nothing particularly original in the prescription. The task of 'Bringing every thought into captivity to Christ' (2 Cor. 10: 5) is particularly necessary in view of the Western capacity to compartmentalise thought and life – to adopt one set of principles for our daily lives and another set for our religious life.

This problem is not confined to the highly-educated. Actively promoted by the press and electronic media, secularist philosophy has now filtered in simplified form to virtually everyone in the West. So, both in evangelism and nurturing new Christians, we need to be in the business of challenging conventional assumptions and reshaping thinking. For many today, the task of evangelism must begin by deconstructing these conventional opinions and replacing them with assumptions derived from scripture. The task must continue after conversion. Brethrenism has often assumed that, once conversion and baptism have taken place, all that is necessary is for the believer to participate in the ordinary meetings of the fellowship. For many today, this is asking too much of them, somewhat like bringing a diver up too quickly, thus giving him the 'bends'. What is needed are intermediate stages of basic Christian teaching, focusing on both doctrine and ethics, packaged in a culturally-familiar form which provides informal fellowship with Christians. Many Evangelical churches need to give more attention to this stage in building the Christian life – just as they need to consider how to make their meetings culturally sympathetic to new converts and younger people

generally.

It should go almost without saying that evangelism and the nurturing of new believers needs to be carefully planned and organised.

It is evident that in Western societies, and possibly increasingly in other societies, the small group has a large role to play in bringing people to Christ and providing the environment for basic discipling. What is needed are staging posts which bring the non-believer gradually into contact with Christian people and the church. The circumstances need to be informal and unthreatening. Above all, they need to enable the non-believer to develop relationships with Christians - to enable them to feel relaxed and at home. They need the confidence of feeling that in some sense they belong, that this is 'their' group or church, before they will begin to listen and give credence to what is being said about the faith. They need to 'belong' before they will 'believe'. Such events need to provide a gradual and easy route into the larger meetings of the church. Careful thought also needs to be given to the content of what is said at such groups. Above all, it needs to be accessible to the non-believer, that is, expressed in language which is intelligible and starts from where the non-believer is in terms of their understanding of the faith. There is, of course, a number of formulaic approaches which can be used, whether it is Alpha, Christianity Explored, or some other programme.

Turning particularly to the stage of nurturing, after people have made a profession of faith, the same principles apply. It is not sufficient to assume that the ordinary meetings of the church will meet the special needs of new believers. Still less will new believers find the traditional Brethren 'breaking of bread' meeting easy to identify with. A staged introduction to what the Christian life means, to the responsibilities of the individual Christian, and to the responsibilities of church life is needed. Again, this is best done in small groups, in an informal context, which provide fellowship and in which a strong pastoral relationship can be developed with each new believer. Again, a number of ready-made programmes are available, and some individual congregations have produced excellent material which they will probably be willing to share with other churches. What is certain is that local churches need to put real effort into discipleship training in today's secular world. If they do so, they are likely to find

that there are real benefits in terms of the stabilisation of new believers and the contribution that they can make to church life. This is all the more necessary in a world in which there is now little background understanding of Christianity or scripture, and in which the thought of many ordinary people is deeply infected by secularist ideas.

4

Developing spiritual gifts

The Brethren tradition was right to expect that every believer would be fully involved in the work of the church and would exercise the spiritual gifts that God had given them. It was clear that 'to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good' (1 *Cor.* 12: 7) and that that manifestation ought to be used for the benefit of the church. That tradition itself perhaps tended to underestimate the range and multiplicity of the different kinds of gift, service and work which are assumed in all the relevant passages in the New Testament. To flourish and mature as they are intended, Christian fellowships need these gifts to be widely exercised. This raises the question as to how these gifts are to be discovered, encouraged and developed to the benefit of the church.

This process does seem to have operated tolerably well in Open Brethren congregations for something like five generations. A range of gifts and service were evident. The churches did enjoy at least passable congregational leadership, a leadership which managed to maintain lively churches and plant others on a continuous basis. This was so because a stream of willing younger people came forward from generation to generation. They assumed that they should serve the Lord in various evangelistic, teaching and pastoral activities, and regarded aspiration to the office of elder as biblically-approved.

What now seems to be happening, at least in Anglo-Saxon areas of the world, is that the exercise of spiritual gift, and willingness to bear the responsibilities of church leadership, seem to be drying up. Indeed, there are many current leaders who are looking in vain to identify the next generation of activists and leaders. Younger people often seem unwilling to take responsibility for church activity and evangelism on a consistent, long-term basis, and unwilling to assume the responsibility of eldership. Christian and church commitment are

undertaken only reluctantly, if at all. Beyond that, there seems increasingly to be a lack of understanding of spiritual gifts and an unwillingness to exercise them in the interest of the congregation. Even an invitation to participate in open prayer can be met with a stony, if not, truculent silence. Increasingly, the desire seems to be for worship and Christian activity to be done on their behalf by others.³

This represents a major challenge to existing church leaderships and to educators more widely. How is motivation to be restored? How is believers' understanding of the nature and operation of spiritual gifts to be increased? How are believers to be encouraged to discover and use the spiritual gifts which we are led by scripture to believe that they have?

These are certainly important issues which, in the English-speaking world, are pressing many Brethren churches in the direction of a paid,

³ It is often argued that this is a consequence of the greater pressures of life on people today. That such pressures are harsher now than in the previous generation may be true, but if we look further back, to the century between 1850 and 1950, it would be difficult to argue that people had more time than now for the responsibilities of church life. What have certainly changed in the West are expectations about rights to personal fulfillment and enjoyment, and the possibilities of enjoying a wide range of leisure activities which were formerly unknown. With these expectations, the willingness to make sacrifices in the interests of God's work often seems to have wilted. On this point, a decisive change seems to occur in the mid-twenties, when, in many, previous enthusiasm settles back into a desire for a quiet and comfortable life.

professional leadership which is expected to undertake Christian service in a priestly way on behalf of the congregation - a development which is diametrically contradictory to the normal theory that the role of staff workers is to enable and release spiritual gift in the congregation. It is also fundamentally contradictory to the New Testament's understanding of Christian ministry.

5

Training and developing local church leaders

A crucial distinctive feature of churches of Brethren background is that local church leadership is not exclusively professional. Much of the leadership of churches is, and we believe ought to be, in the hands of people who are engaged in 'tentmaking' or whose calling is, in part, in secular pursuits. An appropriate balance must, of course, be struck between unpaid and paid leadership, both at the local and supra-local levels. That there is an important role for those who receive financial support for their ministry cannot be doubted on grounds either of scripture or practicality. More generally, there is a real need for people who devote themselves wholly or mainly to the work of the Kingdom, though it does not follow that people in such circumstances must inevitably be supported financially. It would be highly undesirable if local church leadership were to become entirely professionalised. Many different denominations have recognised this in the last generation. It would also be impracticable, as is currently being demonstrated in other denominations - even the Catholic Church recognises the value of worker-priests for reasons of both principle and practice.

In churches of Brethren background, a movement to a largely-paid leadership would have catastrophic implications for the missionary and church-planting endeavour of the churches. For the scale of missionary work of Brethren churches in the past was, in part, attributable to the fact that resources were needed only on a comparatively modest scale in the home churches. This was precisely because ecclesiology said that there should be no paid pastorate.

If, then, a goodly proportion of leadership in the local church is to continue to be self-supporting, this raises the critical question of the training and development of that leadership (indeed, of its 'formation' in the wider French sense). In former generations in Brethren

churches, very little consideration was given to the question: it was generally assumed that devotional immersion in scripture and prayer, the reading of the denominational magazines, and experience in a variety of church activities (youth work, Sunday school, etc.) would suffice. In any case, since the accent of eldership was on rule rather than on pastoring, teaching and strategic leadership, the need for training and development in these latter areas was not perceived as being particularly important. This was so especially where age was perceived as the chief criterion for selection for church leadership.

But if, on scriptural grounds, our perception of the responsibilities and burdens of church leadership is wider than that, there is a role for formal training and reflection, to enable people to develop their gifts in a way which is beneficial for the churches which they lead or may lead in the future. This is particularly so in those cultures which are increasingly laying great emphasis on formal training, and where it is the expectation of both leaders and congregations that leaders should be trained and developed, even if they are self-supporting.

This, in turn, raises the question of both the content and mechanisms of such training and development.

Content of leadership training

The content needs to bear in mind that, under God, the all-round performance of elders/church leaders needs to be improved if the future health and growth of local churches is to be assured. In turn, it needs to be recognised that effective church leadership has three crucial dimensions – personal spiritual character, the functional responsibilities of church leaders, and the spiritual gifts which they need. All three subjects need to be addressed in the training and development of church leaders.

The *personal characteristics* which need particular attention are:

- *Spirituality and personal experience of the Lord.* It remains crucially important that church leaders should not simply be discharging a task, however important that may be. They need to be spiritual people who have a genuine and continuing personal experience of the Lord. This cannot itself be provided through

training, of course, but the training and development programme can encourage and challenge each individual to continue to develop these qualities; and it can provide some structures which may help individuals in that direction.

- *Servanthood and humility.* These characteristics are, on the Lord's authority, indispensable in Christian leadership (*John 13:14-16*) and were strongly reinforced by Peter (*1 Pet. 5: 1 - 8*).
- *Sacrificial commitment to the fellowship.* Leadership of the local church cannot be effective unless it is obvious to all how much the leader is prepared to sacrifice on its behalf. This characteristic is important in establishing the leader's credentials and authority in the mind of the congregation.
- *Prioritisation of the congregation in the life and work of the leader.* This is closely related to the previous requirement. To be effective, the congregational leader must be prepared to give sufficient time to the work of leadership.
- *Relational capacity.* Quite apart from particular giftings, each leader needs to be able to build strong relationships with church members. Not every relationship will be of the same depth, of course, though individual church members should be able to feel that they have a strong relationship with at least one of the leaders. But church members do need to be confident about the character and integrity of their leaders, and this can be assured only through transparent and strong relationships.

The *key functions* of church leaders that are discernible in the New Testament are:

- *Oversight.* The supervision, management and administration of the fellowship must be effective, at least at the collective level of the eldership. It must not be casual or slapdash, as regrettably it sometimes is, even on the part of those who do not tolerate such poor performance in their professional lives. One of the most common weaknesses of group leadership is lack of co-ordination between the individual members of the leadership – that the church seems to be a shambles. It is this, perhaps more than anything else, that brings the biblical principle of plural leadership

into disrepute, and makes people long for monarchical leadership of the local church.

- *Pastoral care.* It is crucial that elders/church leaders should shepherd the flock in an effective and diligent fashion. It was lack of proper shepherding which called out the strongest prophetic utterances against the religious leaders of Israel and Judah (see, e.g., *Ezek.* 34).
- *Teaching, discipling, and guarding of sound doctrine.* The New Testament is clear that elders must be sound teachers, and this links closely with the Lord's command to the apostles to make disciples and teach (*Matt.* 28: 19,20). The main burden of teaching a particular congregation should rest with its leaders. While input from outsiders is desirable from time to time, for example, from inter-church leaders, something is wrong if the congregational leaders are unsuited to bearing the main burden of teaching and discipling. This is not to argue, of course, that every elder or church leader must of necessity have a platform ministry. There are many effective ways of teaching, including in small groups and one-to-one in the pastoral situation.
- *Leadership.* Congregational leaders must lead! The overwhelming evidence of scripture is that God, at least in part, uses human leadership to achieve his purposes within the people of God. This point is especially important, because of the tendency of people in the Brethren tradition to think that leadership is for God alone, and that elders positively ought not to try to be leaders of the flock.
- *Strategy.* Leadership entails having a clear idea from the Lord as to the direction in which the fellowship ought to be going - as to what it should be trying to achieve for him.
- *Governing and disciplining (ruling).* From time to time, a painful task for church leaders will be the disciplining of church members. More generally, church leadership must be suitably firm, if only to combat insecurity on the part of the fellowship. A sense of insecurity on the part of individual members is one of the most destructive factors in church life.

The spiritual gifts which are germane to church leadership, and

which should be displayed by the eldership group as a whole, are those of the:

- *Prophet.* This is the ability to speak directly from the Lord in a manner which encourages, strengthens and comforts the church.
- *Evangelist.* This is a gift which is often neglected in selecting church leaders. Its representation in the leadership body of a church is important if the church is to develop through conversion growth, rather than simply through transfer growth. (Transfer growth frequently results from good pastoral care and teaching: conversion growth needs more than that.)
- *Pastor*)
) or *pastor-teacher*
- *Teacher*)

These gifts need little explanatory comment. The close relationship between them should be noted. In particular, teaching is usually ineffective if it is merely the imparting of factual knowledge, albeit of scripture. Teaching should grow out of perception of the pastoral needs of those taught, and the teacher should always seek to apply the word pastorally to the lives, needs and situation of the hearers. To do this the itinerant teacher must rely on prophetic guidance as to needs of the hearer. But the resident teacher and pastor also needs prophetic guidance if ministry is to be effective.

- *Leader.* Scripture is replete with evidence that the people of God need spiritual leadership. It remains necessary in the age of the church. Leadership remains vitally necessary for churches which are committed to plural eldership and every-member ministry. The plurality must find ways of giving a clear lead to the congregation as guided by the Lord. This is all too often neglected.
- *Strategist.* Leadership needs to be strategically competent. This is as true in the local church as it is in para-church bodies or in evangelism. The gift that seems to me to be of particular relevance is that of 'administration' (1 Cor 12: 28). At root the

reference is to the steersman of the ship.⁴ This is an extraordinarily apt metaphor, since Christian leadership is much more like sailing a ship (charting a course which takes into account ever-changing wind, weather and tidal conditions and the particular sailing characteristics of the ship) than it is like steering a modern cruise-liner.

- *Ruler.* This is the gift of government deriving from personal spiritual authority (exercised in conjunction with the other leaders and indeed with the congregation, according to the New Testament – see *1 Cor. passim*): ‘if it is leadership, let him govern diligently’ (*Rom.* 12: 8c – NIV).
- *Encourager.* This gift is closely related to those of the prophet, pastor and teacher. The older translations refer to exhortation, while many more recent translations speak of encouragement, a key need in churches. (*Cf.* ‘...everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.’ (*1 Cor.* 14: 3.) See also *Acts* 25: 31, 32.)
- *Utterer of wisdom.* Wisdom is a key requirement for leadership which commands the confidence of those who are led. The spiritual gift must surely be the capacity to express divine wisdom as led by the Lord, though, as with many spiritual gifts, it will often be found in conjunction with people who are naturally recognised as wise.
- *Discerner.* I suggest that this is the ability to see to the heart of a matter or situation (including both fact and motivation) with the benefit of divine perception. Again it is not unrelated to the task of the pastor and ruler. The gift seems to me to be most clearly demonstrated in the New Testament by Peter when confronted by Ananias’ and Sapphira’s deception (*Acts* 5: 1 – 11). As that text makes clear (v. 11), the gift certainly enhanced the authority of the leadership!

⁴ The ‘administration’ of some modern translations has led some to think of this as a routine, quasi-diaconal gift. AV (KJV) and RV had ‘governments’, with in the RV margin ‘powers’. F.F. Bruce’s paraphrase was ‘the capacity for government’, while the New RSV offers ‘forms of leadership’. Literally, according to Alexander Souter’s lexicon, *kubernesis* is ‘steering’ or ‘piloting’.

The relevant spiritual gifts are evidently inter-related, inter-twined, overlapping and mutually-reinforcing. In the same way, the three groups of requirements outlined above (spiritual characteristics, eldership functions, and spiritual gifts) should not be disconnected from each other. They are clearly intimately linked at many points. The challenging task in developing church leadership is to enhance elders/leaders individually and collectively in this three-fold matrix of personal characteristics, functional performance and spiritual gifts.

In addition, however, there is a dimension of development and training which is of particular importance to churches which are committed to collective leadership. This concerns the practice of plural leadership, teamwork, group dynamics, respect for and encouragement of equals, and the release by the group of individuals to exercise their gifts and ministry to the benefit of the congregation. Much goes wrong in churches (not just those of Brethren background) because of lack of appreciation and understanding of these matters. Often, the difficulties are traceable to a lack of psychological maturity on the part of individuals. Regrettably, for too many, the exercise of Christian ministry is a form of spiritual ego-trip, the very antithesis of the personal humility that should characterise the Christian leader. More prosaically, the group may not function well because the individual members understand neither themselves and their own weaknesses and strengths, nor the way in which groups function, whether well or badly. It is critical that church leaders, and leaderships collectively, should receive instruction in these areas. The need for this kind of training is particularly important because of the potential tension between *collective* leadership and *decisive* leadership. Too often, plural leaderships are paralysed by their own inner tensions or, more simply, by failure to weld themselves into a team. It should be noted in respect of this whole area of collective leadership that variations of cultural context make for large differences in practice and behaviour.

Self-supported church leaders need also to be encouraged to apply in the church relevant insights from their experience and training in secular life. In the West, at least, very large sums are spent by public and private organisations on training their staff so as to achieve improved performance. Technical training, for example, on how a particular computer chip works, may not be transferable to the

church. But much is: for example, in human management and making public presentations. It is strange that this transference is often neglected. An important challenge to leadership education is therefore to encourage leaders and potential leaders to apply relevant aspects of secular training and experience in their direct service of the Lord.

Mechanisms of leadership training

The preceding paragraphs deal with the comparatively straightforward aspects of training and development of church leaders. The mechanics of delivering training for church leaders are more difficult. They present major practical issues. Many elders/church leaders are in secular employment and support themselves. There are real advantages when the majority of church leaders live in what congregations perceive to be the real world, as distinct from being professional Christians. For such leaders are people who are well aware of what real life is like for the average church member. On the other hand, self-supporting leaders are busy people and a substantial proportion of their time must inevitably be committed to earning a living. Church leadership itself is not light work. It entails much sacrifice on the part of the individuals concerned and their spouses and families.

This means that full-time or part-time study is generally impracticable. One or two weeks of summer school may be possible, but not in countries, such as the USA, where annual leave allowances are very restricted. Development programmes for church leaders and prospective church leaders must therefore focus on the following in particular:

- *Evening and Saturday morning sessions*
- *Retreat days*
- *Occasional weekend courses*
- *Discussion meetings between leaders* to enable them to compare notes and swap ideas - to profit from their collective experience
- *Directed reading*
- *Distance and internet learning* entailing the preparation of extended essays, etc.

- *Mentoring and spiritual direction*, that is, one-to-one discussion on the spot with a more experienced tutor/director. This has real potential and was not unknown in the earlier days of the Brethren movement, though the initiative was usually individual, rather than being in any sense a general phenomenon in the movement.

One challenge is whether the practical means described above can achieve the decisive shift of consciousness in the student which is critical to effective education. This is brought about by inspired teaching on the one hand, and a high degree of intensity and immersion in study on the other. The former can be provided within the restrictions of the mechanisms proposed. The latter is more difficult and in this regard the mentoring relationship may be very important indeed. Much depends on the commitment of the student.

A second challenge is that of catching the vision of the need for, and benefits of, major improvements in the development and training of self-supported church leaders. The vision needs to be caught both by the potential teachers and by the potential students. Both are essential. There will be no progress unless suitable training opportunities are provided. Nor will there be progress unless the potential students perceive their need and its significance, and are prepared to make the necessary effort. Improving the quality and spiritual vision of congregational leadership is critical to the fortunes of very many local churches.

6

Training and developing staff workers

Many Brethren churches, in the West at least, are increasingly dependent on paid staff workers. This is not just a question of pastor-teachers in key leadership roles. It extends to youth leaders, community development workers, community evangelists, administrator/co-ordinators, and so on. Churches of Brethren background, certainly in the UK, do not find it easy to recruit such staff at all, let alone the right quality of people. The churches themselves are not in general producing a stream of suitable people. Those that are coming forward are obliged to undertake formal training either in non-denominational colleges or in the colleges of other denominations. In itself this is not a bad thing. There is certainly value in the widening of horizons that such experience offers, both for individuals and for the churches which they eventually serve. But, not surprisingly, the result is that the individuals often move into full-time service in churches directly connected with those colleges rather than in churches of Brethren background. Those churches are in turn forced to recruit staff workers who have no knowledge or experience of the ecclesiology, leadership approaches, peculiarities, strengths and weaknesses of the particular group of churches. The infusion of new blood and different experience is valuable and beneficial, of course. But, given the rather special ecclesiological insights and character of churches of Brethren background, it can frequently make for tension and put at risk the very distinctiveness of those churches.

Some think that it does not matter if that distinctiveness is being abandoned. But if it does matter because of the scriptural character of those insights, then vitally-important questions arise. How are people from these churches to be encouraged to consider as an option the role of staff worker in such churches? And how are those who consider that they are thus called to be given formal training which is

appropriate for them? In the UK at least, the dearth of people coming forward for staff work of different kinds in churches of our background must be a serious concern. It is a symptom of the wider problems of these churches (as is, for example, the lack of any new hymnology emerging from them).

Further, the lack of institutions for training such people is a serious question. Can a denomination whose key distinctives relate to the nature of church life and the nature of ministry obtain its staff workers exclusively from colleges (and perhaps more so, student bodies) which have significantly different perspectives on these matters? Are effective Brethren institutions needed? On a canvas wider than the UK, could they be organised on an international basis, at least to meet the needs of particular regions, in order to ensure that they are viable and have critical mass educationally?

7

Strengthening theological (biblical) competence

It is important that any substantial group of churches should develop a good degree of theological competence, i.e., deep understanding of scripture and the ability to apply it to different aspects of human life, to develop a truly Christian world-view, one in which philosophy and ethics are based on a truly biblical theology. This is the more necessary in a world in which Christian and non-Christian alike are deeply influenced by agnostic secularism and by post-modernism.

Those who call for the development of a Christian mind in intelligent Christians are usually calling for the development of a high level of theological competence of a systematic kind, and the application of that knowledge to issues of public and private ethics. It is, however, a real challenge as to how this is to be done - there have been many efforts of different kinds in the past 30 years, but they have had only limited success. It may be that churches of Brethren background with their heritage and professional resources are better placed than some other types of congregation to arrange suitable events, whether for individual churches or for groups of churches. They may have a sufficient number of members who can benefit from, and make an expert input to, study of this kind. And, in some places at least, the tradition of 'lay' biblical and theological knowledge may still be sufficiently alive to facilitate the kind of courses that would be necessary.

The question of the development of competence in biblical studies and theology is a rather separate matter. As already noted, I doubt that as many younger scholars of Brethren background are moving into these academic areas as was the case in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, the inspirational example of some key figures within the Brethren was an important factor. If there is now a gap in this area, it is difficult to see how it can be filled, unless academics in the relevant

fields, and church leaders, encourage people with the necessary talent to move into biblical studies and theology. The mood in the churches is, it seems to me, that the brightest and best should be encouraged - laudably perhaps - to enter more apparently activist area of Christian service. There is certainly a need for younger people with the talents to catch the vision of the contribution which they could make by developing their expertise. With churches of Brethren connexion in 130 countries in the world, there is every reason to expect that sufficient people with the ability, aptitude and calling are to be found across the world. It would be a question of identifying and encouraging them, and funding suitable training for them. The last point is particularly important. Churches of Brethren background are strongest in poorer countries like Angola, Zambia, and India. There is a real need to provide funding to enable suitable people from these countries to have further training. This calls for vision on the part of those who control funds, and on the part of individual churches who might see it as their calling from the Lord to support a particular student from abroad.

Conclusion

If training and development for the Lord's service is to improve in the churches for which this booklet is particularly intended, it will be necessary to sense the need, and catch the vision, for it. It will be necessary to believe that re-energised, Spirit-filled, equipped leadership is desperately needed in God's work, whether in evangelism, in para-church bodies or in the local church. It will certainly be necessary for individual leaders and potential leaders to sense the call of God to prepare and develop themselves better, so as to be more effective in the tasks to which the Lord has called them. It will also be necessary to believe that, under God, definite actions can be taken to improve the flow of potential leaders and to equip them for the work –

- by constructing the right kind of courses, in the UK at least,
- by developing colleges like Tilsley College at GLO so as to increase their output,
- by funding theological education and training for students from the Third World,
- by providing the books and other resources needed in the nascent institutions in many different countries,

and so on.

This booklet is in essence a policy paper. No policy will make any difference unless it is implemented effectively. In this case, effective implementation calls for action by a wide variety of people and institutions, including local churches.