

# Setting God's People Free: A new agenda for a renewal of the business of faith?

*Nick Shepherd* outlines the message of the Church of England initiative Setting God's People Free, which sets out a strategy to empower lay persons to recognise and affirm their calling to their secular work. It asks for radical reform of worship as well as of theology based on our all being baptised equally into Christ.

A few years ago I was engaged in a 'how was your week?' coffee chat after church with a friend of mine. In the course of the conversation he told me about a new role he had been given as a consultant in the financial services sector. In the wake of the post 2008 crash his firm had been retained by a large bank to work with their senior team to, and I quote, 'help make them ethical again.' A few supportive friends prayed with him, but I don't think we ever prayed for him in this role in our regular church intercessions, nor for the dozens of others in our congregation with similarly stressful and influential roles. What troubled me more, following further conversations, was the realisation that as a church we were doing very little to help him, and others, work out what role faith played in the business of work. What, in addition to supportive prayer, might help to inform decisions, shape approaches and ultimately equip them to fulfil such a vital role? What would help my friend to not only be a leader in his field, but a Christian leader? This story is similar to others told in *Setting God's People Free*, a report written by an Archbishops' Council Working Group report into how the Church could better nurture 'Christian leadership in wider society'.

*Setting God's People Free* (SGPF) sets out the need for a programme of change within the Church of England

to enable the whole people of God to live out the Good News of Jesus confidently in all of life, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. The overriding question behind this was:

*"Will we determine to empower, liberate and disciple the 98% of the Church of England who are not ordained and therefore set*



*them free for fruitful, faithful mission and ministry, influence, leadership and, most importantly, vibrant relationship with Jesus in all of life? And will we do so not only in church-based ministry on a Sunday but in work and school, in gym and shop, in field and factory, Monday to Saturday?''*

As a report SGPF covers ground that has been highlighted on many a previous occasion. It repeats the diagnosis made in both the 1949 report *Evangelism and the Laity* and the 1985 report *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity*, that the Church of England has a general cultural flaw in considering 'the laity' as the 'non-ordained' – and seeing them as an inactive rather than active population of the Church. An identity, it has to be said, that the majority of lay people might well be quite happy with. However, these reports all argue that this is to the detriment of the health and vitality of the Church, and contributes to its ineffectiveness in engaging in a transformational way with society. In common with these reports SGPF also calls for a change in culture, away from this tendency. Importantly, SGPF calls for such a change not only so that lay people might fully participate in transforming church structures, but also that the Church herself might be better empowered to transform wider society. So what, if anything, is new about *Setting God's People Free*?

SGPF articulates two vital shifts in our church culture that must occur if all God's people are to be set free to fulfil our calling to not only 'evangelise the nation' but also actively engage in serving the common good.

**Shift 1: We, ordained and lay, must teach and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that show the different the Gospel makes.**

Confident discipleship leads to a higher capacity and deeper creativity in pursuing both our individual calling and corporate vocation as the church – in the home, community, workplace and society.

**Shift 2: We, ordained and lay, must recognise that we are all baptised equally into Christ, that we are equal in worth and status, complementary in gifting and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission.**

Baptism in Christ is the primary sacrament which marks the calling of all as disciples. The vocation to ordained ministry and service in the church in authorised lay ministry are only one part of this calling. For most Christians, our calling lies in being ambassadors for Christ who are engaged in God's mission in the wider world. A calling to 'make a bank ethical again' is one that the Church should not only affirm, but actively enable.

To facilitate these cultural changes SGPF makes eight concrete recommendations for action across a variety of areas of church life. Four are particularly relevant to the way that the national church and dioceses operate. Specifically:

**1. Reforming church structures and legislation to strengthen relationships between clergy and lay people**

**2. Bishops (and senior staff) integrating a concern for lay people into personal and diocesan priorities, practices, and processes**

**3. Re-focussing clergy selection, training, and development around the development and discipling of lay people**

**4. Reorienting church communications to balance focus on clergy, lay ministry and the Church as an institution with the central role of lay people in the life and mission of the Church in the world**

Four other levers of change are identified that relate closely to the specific opportunities and challenges for local churches, each of which should be supported and resourced by their dioceses and the national church.

**5. Developing a biblical vision for the role (calling & vocation) of lay people**

**6. Listening to lay people's experiences**

**7. Equipping lay people for their Monday to Saturday frontline ministries**

**8. Enhancing our gathered worship and liturgy to resource lay people for their Monday to Saturday lives**

I believe that the identification of these two shifts and the eight recommendations demonstrate a crucial difference to previous reports. They have a stronger sense of the importance of calling all God's people to seek vocations away from the church, and into leadership or influence in business and community. In fact, the language of leadership leads some to criticise *SGPF* as being more about aligning the culture of the Church to the world of management and corporate enterprise than to Christlikeness<sup>2</sup>. What we mean by 'leadership' is of cause hotly debated itself. However, its use in the context of a report on what is effectively around discipleship is important. Whilst more needs to be done to develop thinking here, it points to the notion that leadership in banking or any number of fields can be undertaken as an expression of Christian vocation.

It reclaims and begins to reimagine Luther's notion of importance of secular work not merely as an arena for witness, but as an opportunity to express our worship of God<sup>3</sup>. It calls Christian leaders not only to model something unique in their character, but also how to profess faith through their profession.

The second area where *SGPF* differs from previous reports may well reflect this alignment with leadership away from the church in that, unlike previous reports, *SGPF* also includes an explicit focus on implementation. It is not enough to merely call for our culture to change, we also have to work to change our culture.

### **Setting God's people free (from): an inadequate culture of formation and worship**

Thus far, I have used the word 'culture' rather loosely. When we talk about culture change in and through the church, what exactly are we talking about? To help explore how and why I believe that *SGPF* does have a new agenda this needs to be addressed. I use culture in a very general sense to refer to 'patterns and practices of shared life'. These patterns and practices contribute to our formation as human beings. One of the key questions about Christian formation and identity revolves around how well we are formed by the 'patterns and practices of faith' and how this formation interacts with our wider socialisation as citizens of a given and larger culture<sup>4</sup>. In the next section I will discuss how the agenda for cultural change set out in *Setting God's People Free* corresponds to wider calls for a renewal of Christian practices that can result in the type of formation needed for a 'Secular Age'<sup>5</sup>. Following this I will outline why such a root to formation could help to engender a fresh imagination and vision for Christian participation in wider society – in commerce, civic engagement and social life.



Photo: [www.thebalance.com](http://www.thebalance.com)

## Privatised faith

**“even in close personal working relationships it is still hard to talk about being Christian.”**

The problem we face in Christian formation (discipleship if you prefer) was illustrated to me in a recent conversation I had with a senior Human Resources Executive for a large multi-national corporation. We were talking about the challenges of living out a Christian faith in the world of work. Two issues in particular concerned us. The first was the common trait for seemingly most people of faith to privatise this area of life. My conversation partner however felt that Christians more than other people of faith have deeply internalised this notion of a secular/sacred divide. They consider that not only is faith personal and not an issue likely to be openly discussed; it is also consciously disconnected from decisions and actions in the workplace. The second issue, which is of course related to the first, is that even in close personal working relationships it is still hard to talk about being Christian. Being a Christian is a ‘protected identity’. To open up this aspect of who you are to others runs the risk of being misconstrued, misunderstood and perhaps mocked.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. Smith argues that the challenge of Christian formation can be summarised as a pattern of

“formation, mis-formation, and counter-formation”. Smith uses the term ‘cultural liturgies’ to describe the practices in any aspect of society that form identity. His argument is that consumer society is doing a better job at forming people than the church, that from a Christian perspective secular liturgies provide practices that “*constitute mis-formation of our desires...by capturing our imaginations and drawing us into ritual practices that ‘teach’ us to love something very different to the Kingdom of God*”. Smith goes on to argue that worship (in its broadest sense of identity-shaping participation in Christian practices) serves as “a counter formation to secular liturgies”<sup>6</sup>. In the example above this would be the adoption of a view of the world absorbed through school, the media and the world of work, where faith relates to a private realm and not to the public square. This view of culture and formation is arguable, but it resonates with the experience of my HR executive. We need to regain an appreciation for worship as ‘the work of the people’ as ‘something we do as a people seeking God’s Kingdom’ to ‘mark us out to be a peculiar people’<sup>7</sup>. It is this challenge, according to Smith, that

culture change in the Church needs to address. The culture change that SGPF calls for is in harmony with what Smith calls ‘fresh cultural liturgies’ within the church, though the connection may not be immediately obvious.

To help illustrate what needs to be addressed in this culture change, SGPF proposes a model of viewing the Church as ‘gathered’ and ‘sent’. While its theology needs to be developed, this model draws attention to whether our congregations and worshipping communities are really places where the whole people of God – young and old alike – are being formed and equipped for the places where they are sent: homes, schools, communities, workplaces and elsewhere. The notion of the church gathering in worship and being sent in service lies at the heart of the pattern of Anglican liturgy. Yet this understanding and practice is crucially absent in the experience of many Anglicans.

The report also discusses some of the barriers to this culture change. One of the most significant of these, as the first culture shift identifies, is the claim that we have trapped ourselves in an understanding of



Luther posting his 95 theses in 1517  
Ferdinand Pauwels, 1872

**The priesthood of all believers, central to Luther's theology**

vocation and calling that refers only to ordained ministry and rarefies this call, to the detriment of the imagination and formation of the non-ordained. This creates a sense among lay people of disengagement in being the gathered church, a lack of attention to their experiences as the sent church and a marginalisation of sense of call they might have to their secular employment. Couple this with the 'privatisation of faith' and 'protected identity' discussed earlier and it isn't hard to see why we are not setting God's people free to be so.

**Setting God's people free (to):  
Re-imagine and re-engage  
with cultural transformation**

This shift has however a broader and more profound aspect. The dualisms of sacred/secular and ordained/lay are, following Smith, an indication of the tensions in the 'mis-formation' driven by wider cultural liturgies and an inadequacy of the church to respond to these. This, I believe, is why we hear repeating concerns and claims in 1949, 1985 and 2017. Whatever the tradition of the church we align with, we have not found the patterns and practices of church life that enable us to effectively 'work

together as the people' to form ourselves as 'the people of God'. SGPF identifies this in the context of the ordained-centred culture of the Church of England. Smith, speaking from the Reformed Church tradition in the United States, shows this to be a broader problem of the church in a secular age. The challenge then for the Church of England is whether it can re-engage with, and re-imagine, its patterns of practice – from its liturgy, its ordered life and its understanding that:

*God calls his people to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. The Church is the Body of Christ, the people of God and the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit. In baptism the whole Church is summoned to witness to God's love and to work for the coming of his kingdom.*

Within this Deacons, Priests and Bishops are given to 'serve this royal priesthood' so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known'. This is not to reduce

the calling to ordained ministry to that of a religious practices manager or spiritual life coach for the laity. SGPF also calls for a new freedom for clergy to be more able to pursue the interests, gifting and calling they might have in wider spheres of life. A structural and theological challenge in its own right.

The second culture shift is concerned with this renewed notion of what it means to be the people of God. The fact that we are all baptised equally into Christ should lead us to re-orientate our 'shared life and practices' accordingly. This should rebalance the way in which clergy and laity regard each other's roles and counter the 'spectre of clericalism'. While this is indeed an issue to be tackled, there is a much deeper reason for seeking to both re-articulate and find ways to re-enforce our Christian identity in baptism. This is the primacy of baptism as the basis on which all Christians are called, and through which our identity as Christians can be assured. A renewed vision for baptism, and a necessary accompanying re-articulation of ordination, are not developed in the report. This remains a focus for the work of theological

enrichment which is to come. What is beginning to be developed in this is a clearer notion of how all Christians are called to a form of representative life in Christ. As the words of the liturgy for Baptism make clear, the call is to a representative life in Christ for all believers<sup>8</sup>.

*“fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ [and to] Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.”*

What is needed here then, to set God’s people free, is a broader vision of what such a representative life might look like, and for this to be at the heart of the ongoing formation and transformation in the patterns and practice of being church. Smith articulates this in reference to the covenantal call in Genesis to be:

*“God’s image bearers for the world, and fulfil the mission of being God’s image bearers by undertaking the work of culture making... We are called to an encounter with the life giving God, who imparts transformative grace through the spirit’s empowerment, making it possible to for us to entertain the vocation given to humanity.”<sup>9</sup>*

Or in other words to live the pattern and practice that we may week in and week out gather, in order that we might ‘go in peace to love and serve the Lord’; to deeply inhabit practices that enable Christian leadership to function as a Kingdom influence in banking and HR.


### **Setting God’s People Free: A new agenda for a renewed church seeking the renewal of God’s world.**

This is the renewal and re-imagination that lies at the heart of SGPF. It is a renewal that is determined to enable the whole people of God to live out the Good News of Jesus confidently in all of life, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. The focus is to facilitate a shift in culture, to shift our liturgy, and to shift the work of the people, not a narrow, centrally driven strategy.

- It **looks beyond and outside Church** structures to the whole people of God at work in communities and wider society – *not to ‘fixing’ the institutional Church.*
- It **challenges** a culture that over-emphasises a distinction between sacred and secular and points to a

fuller vision of calling within the all-encompassing scope of the Gospel – *not to limit vocation to church-based roles.*

- It **seeks to affirm** and enable the complementary roles and vocations of clergy and of lay people, grounded in our common baptism – *not to blur or undermine these distinctions.*
- It **proposes imaginative steps** to nourish, illuminate and connect what is working already in and through parishes and communities of faith – *not to institute a top-down approach.*
- It aims to **build confident involvement**, engagement and leadership of lay people wherever they are called to serve – *not to devise lay alternatives to clergy.*

In pursuing these aims, SGPF embraces the opportunity to impact our nation for Christ through the 98% of the people in the church of England who are not ordained through living out our discipleship and vocation in our homes, communities, schools and workplaces. It seeks to connect the business of faith with the expression of faith in business. 

1 Setting God’s People Free (GS 2056) p. 4. Summary report available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-and-reform/more-about-renewal-reform/setting-gods-people-free>

2 See for instance <https://modernchurch.org.uk/downloads/send/32-articles/860-setting-god-s-people-free-to-do-what-they-are-told>

3 See Graham, Elaine ‘Luther’s Legacy: Rethinking the Theology of Lay Discipleship 500 Years after the Reformation’, *Ecclesiology*, 2017, Volume 13, Issue 3, pages 324 – 348

4 Dykstra, Craig R., and Dorothy C. Bass. “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices.” In *Practicing Theology : Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, 13-32. Grand Rapids, Mich.; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2002.

5 In this article I will draw on the ‘cultural liturgies’ view proposed by James K Smith. See, Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom : Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Volume 1 of *Cultural Liturgies*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009 and Smith, James K. A. *Imagining the Kingdom : How Worship Works*. *Cultural Liturgies*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013.

6 James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom* p.87-88

7 *Ibid* p. 154

8 This should also include the practice of Confirmation as the renewal of baptism vows and also an affirmation of calling and vocation.

9 James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom* p.165



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