

# 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.