

Book Review – Richard Higginson

Calling All God's People:

A theological reflection on the whole church serving God's mission

Church of England, Church House Publishing, paperback, 30 pp, £3.99, ISBN 978-178-140-1637

Kingdom Calling:

The vocation, ministry and discipleship of the whole people of God

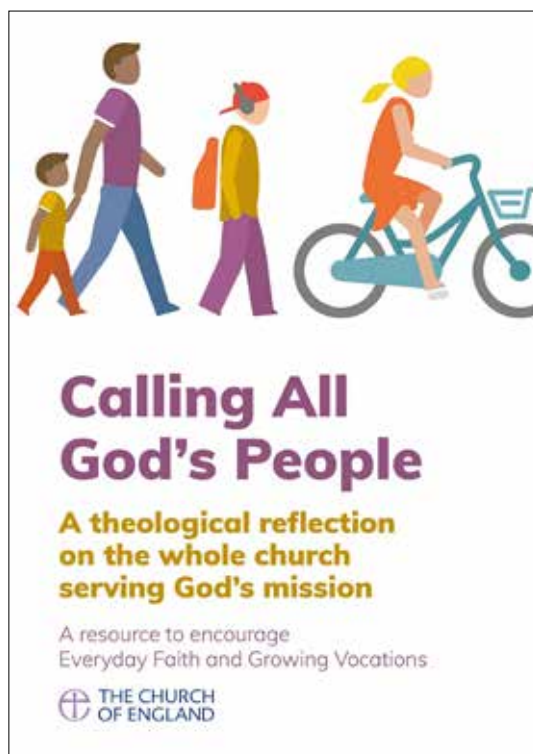
The Faith and Order Commission, Church House Publishing, paperback, 102 pp, £12.99, ISBN 976-0-7153-1176-5

In FiBQ 19:1 programme Director Nick Shepherd introduced *Setting God's People Free*, a bold new Church of England agenda for encouraging and empowering lay people to recognise and pursue God's calling in their secular work. Over the last couple of years the Church of England has been busy, not only in seeking to implement this agenda at a diocesan level, but also in producing two further publications. This review-article introduces and comments on both of them.

Calling All God's People is a slim 30-page paperback designed to instil and reinforce the message of the title – that all God's people are called. It seeks to answer three questions, briefly but theologically: Who does God call? How should we respond to God's call? Are we called to ministry? A one-paragraph 'Conclusion: the command to Go!' follows. It's all set out in an easy-to-read format with attractive illustrations, fleshed out by snapshots of real Christians doing different jobs and explaining how they see their faith expressed in what they do and how they behave. So we meet Melanie the bookshop owner, Harry the scaffolder, Felicity the gin distillery director and Andy the comedian, among several others. There are questions for discussion and I can imagine this booklet working well in a home group

or work group context. The material is eminently accessible.

Kingdom Calling has a very different feel. The style is much more abstract



and personal stories are notable by their absence. It has been written in recognition that *Setting God's People Free* is just one in a long line of Church of England reports about empowering and equipping the laity which goes all the way back to 1945. The major goal of *Kingdom Calling* is to articulate a theological diagnosis of the 'enduring

resistance' to embracing the discipleship and ministry of the whole church, and to identify pathways to healing which might overcome it. Or, as former Faith in Business Chair Eve Poole puts it more pithily in her Preface: 'what is the point of all these worthy Church of England reports, if they have no effect?' (p.ix).

Kingdom Calling identifies three critical factors which have contributed to the Church's persistent failure to put the recommendations of these reports into action. It explores these within a structure of three substantial chapters: 'Vocation: Being Social Creatures', 'Ministry: Understanding the Church' and 'Discipleship: Looking to Jesus'. Seeking the Kingdom of God is seen as a connecting thread that weaves these three themes together.

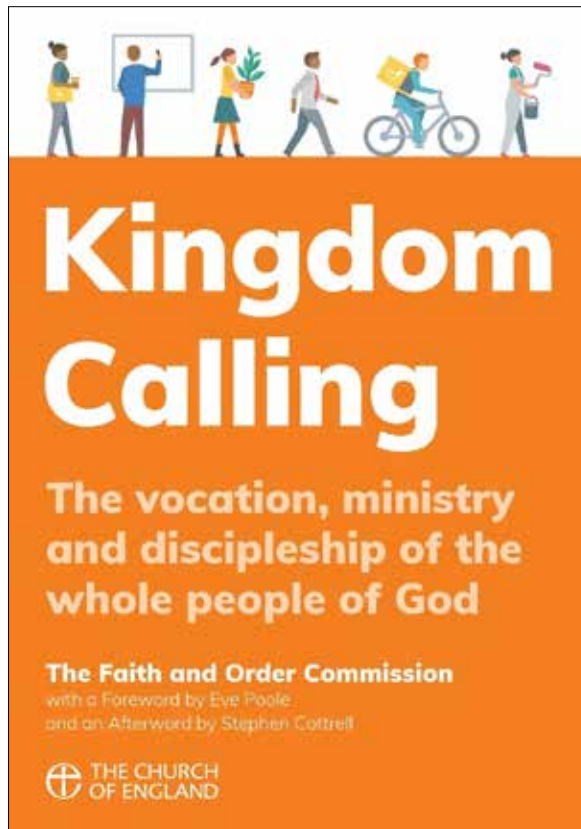
The first critical factor is a **weakness of the theological imagination** regarding the relationship between the central Christian doctrines of creation and salvation and the realities of daily life in human society. Imagination is needed to make those connecting links between the biblical story and present reality. So lay people are all too often *not* being helped to see how their commitment to their specific occupation, profession or sphere of work – sharing in God's work in God's world – might be a vocation. Very true.

The second critical factor is the **impoverishment of our understanding of church** – a tendency to think of the church too much in terms of the local institutional church, to lack appreciation for the fullness of the mystery of the church and the fact that it is meant to be the 'sign, instrument and foretaste of God's Kingdom' (p.52). The report puts its finger on something very important, that in all this talk about empowering the laity there are two very different agendas at work. The first, which addresses the weakness of Christian influence in society, has a focus on *lay discipleship*. The second, which is concerned with the decline in numbers and resources for the institutional church, has a focus on *lay ministry*.

I can readily identify with this from my experience at Ridley Hall Theological College. In 1989 the then Principal, Hugo de Waal, set up the God on Monday Project (which later 'morphed' into Faith in Business) because he was frustrated that the concept of 'ministry of the laity' so easily got reduced into church 'jobs' that lay people might do: youth worker, home group leader, lay reader, etc. While these are all worthy and welcome, his conviction (shared by me, as the person Hugo found to head up this project) was that the main place lay people should be exercising their ministry is in their workplace, Monday to Friday, nine to five and often longer. So we set up Faith in Business as a counter-weight, its focus very definitely being lay discipleship. What has

happened at Ridley now? The college has a Lay Ministry programme that is all about training youth workers and children's workers. Faith in Business has discovered new life as an independent ministry.

The third critical factor is **disorientation in judging how to respond to ever-shifting currents of our culture** – discerning where they need to be resisted and where they ought to be



celebrated. This too is very important. It concerns the shape and direction that Christian discipleship should take in the world of work. The report says that because of its special place in the nation's life the Church of England 'has a particular calling to be a community of disciples where all are able to grow

in the wisdom they need to fulfil this calling in the varied contexts where Christ has called them for his service' (p.74). It notes – quite rightly – that our experience of COVID-19 has highlighted our dependence on those who do jobs associated with low levels of pay as well as low respect and recognition, e.g. shop workers, bus drivers, postal workers and refuse collectors. The report says we need to work at developing practices of listening together, thinking together and discerning together 'what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:2).

Again, I say Amen to all that. But what the report fails to recognise is that because for many areas of life working out what is the will of God is not straightforward – it does indeed need detailed discussion and teasing out – most local churches cannot be expected to deliver. It is beyond their capabilities and not high enough on their order of priorities. That is why we need para-church organisations (faith and work organisations like Faith in Business and ICF) that provide specialist expertise and make a concerted effort to bring fellow-disciples together, sharing ideas and experience for instance in a publication such as FiBQ.

To be fair to Nick Shepherd, he is making a concerted effort to involve organisations like ours in the next phase of implementing *Setting God's People Free*. I salute, applaud and thank him for that. But it would be good to have seen some such recognition in *Kingdom Calling*. 



Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He is now Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FiBQ and the author of several books, including *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* and (with Kina Robertshaw) *A Voice to be Heard*. He is an international speaker on business ethics and the theology of work.