



Setting God's people free to do what they are told

A statement by Modern Church responding to a report by the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England

Modern Church commends [*Setting God's People Free*](#), the Report from the Archbishops' Council, for recognising that clerical culture often stifles contributions by the laity.

However we think many of the proposals would be counter-productive. We therefore propose a different direction of change.

The Church leadership, instead of demanding more data from parishes and giving in return instructions on all aspects of laypeople's lives, should focus on improving levels of theological education. In this way laypeople will be better qualified to understand and explain the nature of Christianity and judge for themselves how to live their Christian lives.

Instead of taking for granted the content of Christian believing as though it was beyond question, it should recognise the variety of Christian beliefs and encourage informed debate between them.

Instead of treating the population as though they could be simply divided into Christians who ought to evangelise and non-Christians to be evangelised, it should accept the wide range of beliefs and talents and the varying degrees of faith and doubt.

Instead of treating evangelism as an obligatory Christian activity and promoting artificial evangelistic activities, it should offer good quality theological resources and leave it to individuals to judge when it is appropriate to recommend their faith.

Instead of seeking to centralise decision-making power in the national leadership they should enable questions of management to be answered at the most local practical level.

Laity in the Church

The Report proposes to promote two cultural changes. One relates to lay involvement in the Church, the other to 'the sent church', by which is meant either 'church-led community social action initiatives' or 'the workplace, wider community and society'. (§2.2).

It is at its best in addressing lay involvement in the Church. It is rightly concerned about the widespread clerical culture in which 'lay people all too often feel underused and disenfranchised by clergy' (§3.3).

Modern Church would like to see the clergy trained, and expected, to work in cooperation with lay Christians and suppress the temptation to inhabit a clerical caste. It is here that the language of 'setting people free' is appropriate: if the proposals are

enacted some lay people may well feel freed from domination. Perhaps a few clergy will too.

Laity outside the Church

On lay activities outside church structures, Modern Church thinks the Report seeks to move in the wrong direction. It explains its overall approach in one of its rare theological observations:

Whilst mission has sometimes been conceived as the work of rescuing souls from a degenerate world, a more holistic and inclusive vision understands it as the property and activity of God at work in the world as creator, redeemer and sustainer... Mission is not about removing people from the world to seek refuge within the Church, therefore, but about releasing and empowering all God's people to be the Church in the world in order that the whole of creation might be transformed and restored in Christ (§3.1).

The need, it tells us, is to 'form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel'. This is supported by statistics from a survey conducted for Spring Harvest, indicating that most lay Christians found the workplace the most challenging context 'to be a disciple of Christ' and received very little help from their churches (§1.2).

Sadly, it continues, 'there is very little curiosity, affirmation, prayer, theological or practical resourcing for these roles at local church level'. Among churchgoers, 'few would have an overall robust theological framework for their role in the world', least of all 'people in manual, unskilled, or semi-skilled work' (§2.3). Therefore,

We think that a clear, consistently communicated vision for lay people and their role in society, 'Monday to Saturday' will play a vital role in inspiring an emerging generation to discover 'whole-of-life' vocation and calling... for example, instilling the Christian story across our schools and to young people, repurposing enterprise around the common good, bringing hope to the most marginalised as doctors, lawyers and care-givers, and redeeming local and national politics (§4.1).

Provision should therefore be made, especially at parish level, for 'support and resources around whole-life discipleship, lay vocation and lay leadership' (§4.4, cf. §4.2).

Thus the argument begins with the observation that lay people tend not to see their daily occupations as mission opportunities, and concludes that the Church needs to provide additional theological resources to 'liberate' them.

What kind of resources?

Modern Church agrees that theological resources for the laity are currently inadequate and that there are major issues regarding what goes on in many workplaces. However the Report's positive proposals would not meet this need. On the contrary, to describe it as 'setting God's people free' is worthy of a post-truth society. Far from being set free, the laity would have additional obligations imposed on them.

The Report gives an example of what it has in mind, but unfortunately it is counter-productive. A policeman working at 10 Downing Street is in a group of Christian men encouraged to describe what they are 'good at in the Lord at work'. After much

reluctance (group members were instructed to write it privately on a piece of paper and later instructed to read it out) he suggests that he is ‘quite good at bringing people back together’. The response is that he has a ‘ministry of reconciliation’, along with a biblical quotation, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’. The event is described:

Here’s a Christian teaching people to forgive one another, teaching other police the ways of Jesus at No 10 Downing Street. But Curt hadn’t been able to read his own life through the lens of the Biblical [sic] and so he hadn’t realised how God had been working through him (§3.1).

The story exemplifies a type of practice common in small group meetings in some circles. Outside those circles these practices generate either horror or derision. Leaving aside the manipulative manner in which he was persuaded to make his statement, and the fact, admitted by the Report, that he was only being affirmed in something he was doing already (so he hardly needed extra training), what remains is that a helpful personal characteristic is dressed up as a Christian ‘ministry’. Reconciliation work is common among non-Christians as well as Christians. Finding a biblical text to associate with it does not make it a Christian act. In practice, what is being done in this example is that a person is being persuaded to reinterpret a natural skill as a Christian skill. It is one of the ways Christian exclusivists build barriers between themselves and non-Christians. Far from encouraging non-Christians to become Christians, it tells them they do not have the ‘ministry’ the Christian has – when in reality they may well have it.

Alternatives to other-worldliness

So what is the proper relationship of Christian theology to the workplace? Whoever did think mission was about ‘removing people from the world to seek refuge in the Church’, why, and how should we disagree with them? The Report provides no satisfactory answers. Its own account is a jumbled mixture of three conflicting theories of humanity. To explain this, a summary of the historical background will be in order.

The idea of Christianity as other-worldly developed in the seventeenth century in response to the religious wars. In an influential passage John Locke argued that a church should restrict its concerns to the salvation of souls in the next life.¹

The main impact on the churches came later, in the nineteenth century reactions against the spread of atheism. Nineteenth century atheists often argued that science would be impossible unless everything was governed by determined and observable sequences of cause and effect. It followed that human behaviour must be determined and predictable. On this basis Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism, argued that democracy was pointless: government should be by sociologists who would in time establish a complete account of the laws governing human behaviour. Although this theory is not accepted by scientists it is still often argued that government should be guided by statistics about human behaviour.

¹ A church should be ‘a voluntary Society of Men, joining themselves together of their own accord, in order to the publick worshipping of God, in such a manner as they judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the Salvation of their Souls... The hopes of Salvation, as it was the only cause of his entrance into that Communion, so it can be the only reason of his stay there.’ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* 7, 9-10.

The nineteenth century religious revivals reacted against this determinism by appealing to spiritual phenomena beyond the reach of science. Clairvoyants became popular. Ghosts appeared more often. Catholics saw more visions of angels, saints and Mary. The Oxford Movement revived the monastic orders with much emphasis on obedience, devotion, fasting and mortification. Among Evangelicals it became common to argue that facts came from the Bible as opposed to science. While Catholic other-worldliness appealed to communal sharing of sacraments, Evangelical equivalents tended to be intensely individualistic. The individual's conversion experience came to be seen as essential. This produced an intense dualism: everybody had to be either a Christian or not a Christian. Christians had an inner relationship with God and accepted the teachings of their church. Many believed that in order for a Christian to help a non-Christian live a better life it would first be necessary to convert them to the Christian faith.

Christians who resisted these other-worldly trends were variously called 'Broad Church', 'liberals' or 'modernists'. Modern Church was founded in 1898 to represent them, and has always argued for a Christianity which helps people in their daily lives.

In this way the nineteenth century produced three contrasting philosophies of humanity. One was determinist and elitist: since humans have no free will a scientific elite should work out the laws of human behaviour and manipulate us for our own good. Another was other-worldly: there is a spiritual reality beyond the reach of science, so Christians should leave physical reality to the scientists and concentrate on the spiritual. The third refused to accept the exaggerated claims of both sides, and continued to expect Christianity to engage with everyday life.²

Although the Report does not describe these developments it supports all three positions, apparently with no awareness of the conflict between them.

1. The report rejects other-worldliness

Firstly, it emphatically rejects theologies that fail to engage with laypeople's ordinary lives. In other words, it rejects the other-worldliness of the nineteenth-century religious revivals and supports the position that was then upheld by the 'liberals'.

2. The report speaks an other-worldly language

Secondly, despite its overt rejection of other-worldly theology, it makes extensive use of the concepts and language developed by Evangelicals to promote it:

- vibrant relationship with Jesus (§1);
- follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life (§1.1);
- Gathered and sent church (§1.4);

² For an overview see Clatworthy, Jonathan, *Liberal Faith in a Divided Church*, Ropley: O Books, 2008, Chapter 6. For Roman Catholicism see Jodock, Darrell, Ed, *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, Cambridge: CUP, 2000; Chadwick, Owen, *From Bossuet to Newman*, Cambridge: CUP, 1957. For the Oxford Movement see Chadwick, Owen, *The Victorian Church: Part 1 1829-1859*, London: SCM, 1970. For Evangelicalism see Bebbington, D W, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989.

- how God has worked in their lives (§1.2);
- whole-life disciple-making disciples (§1.2);
- A disciple is someone who is actively seeking to know Jesus more deeply, to
- learn to love and live in his ways in every area of life (§1.4);
- where people are fruitful (in missional terms); in workplaces and wider society (§2.3);
- the missional opportunity (§2.3);
- whole-life discipleship and formation (§4.1);
- ensuring that clergy know they will always be asked ‘How are you getting on with whole-life disciple-making in your church?’ (§4.3);
- whole life discipleship and vocational journey (§4.4).

These terms are often used in a limited range of Christian circles, but rarely used outside them. They make good sense within a dualistic theology that gives a high priority to Christian mission but limits it to one-on-one conversion attempts. In a more socially and culturally aware theology they are less appropriate.

Every language reveals some things and hides others. While the Report’s language affirms an individualist philosophy of Christian believing and a sharp dualism between Christians and non-Christians, it hides significant gaps in its thesis. We note three.

a. It fails to address the content of Christian theology

A number of theological claims are made in passing. Some are dubious. One wonders what sorts of action are ‘biblically and missionally’ urgent (§1.1). Christianity is equated with a ‘biblical perspective’ (§2.3). We are referred to ‘the full Biblical story’ as though we all knew what it was, despite the continuing debates of biblical scholars (§4.4).

These are only passing expressions. They leave the impression that theological training was in short supply among the authors, but they do not make significant contributions to the proposals. More significant is the fact that the content of Christian theology is almost entirely hidden. The question of *what* is to be evangelised, *what* this ‘whole-life discipleship’ consists of, does not appear.

One is tempted to assume the usual reason. Calvinism, like Roman Catholicism, has a tradition of teaching that all true Christians believe the same thing. The content is not up for grabs; it is a complete given, characteristically premised on the assumption that biblical teaching is harmonious and comprehensive. What evangelists, missionaries and ‘whole life disciples’ do, therefore, is to transmit this given content.

Whatever the reason, the Report tells us nothing about the content of all the mission and discipleship work it seeks to encourage. Moreover its dualistic language, more suited to other-worldly cliques, obscures the fact that it is not providing it.

b. It hides theological variety

In reality of course Christians believe a wide range of very different things. Some stress the spiritual value of the sacraments, some the love of God, some a personal relationship with Jesus, some substitutionary atonement, some the literal accuracy of the Bible. The contradictions between these beliefs have produced centuries of sectarian discord.

The Report mentions none of this. Instead, its dualism describes two kinds of people: Christians and non-Christians. Christians evangelise the others, and the Report's main proposal is to 'set them free' to do it. This gives the impression that Christians *want* to do it. Most, most of the time, do not, though many may make an appropriate evangelistic remark if a suitable occasion arises.

c. It provides no account of evangelising method

Another element hidden from view is any real description of what the people receiving the proposed additional resources are expected to do with them. All we are given is a list of 'stories that illustrate the changes needed'. They are as follows. A teacher observes that the local church prays for the Sunday School work but not for the teaching in the main school. A church develops an adult learning initiative. One person persuades another that doing more for Jesus does not require ordination. A diocese establishes a growth fund. Somebody accepts the principle of 'living and speaking for Christ' in their workplace. Self-employed businesspeople come to believe that providing their employees with jobs is their Christian contribution. A school gate prayer group is set up. A diocesan lay chair is insufficiently supported by his bishop. A middle manager improves appraisal systems in his place of work (§3.1).

This list of good and bad examples is a mixture of the organisational, the ethical and the evangelistic, in no apparent order, as though they were all the same kind of thing. Worse still, they leave the impression that not much is expected. If the changes needed are illustrated by these stories they hardly add up to the cultural changes being proposed.

3. Management-speak

Given the many critiques of recent Church reports, it is not surprising that the authors are anxious to deny that this is just another management project.

The task we face as the Church is not a functional or managerial one... Our goal is not one of re-organisation. Rather it is about redemption. (§1.1).

Nevertheless the Report borrows heavily from the secular elitist tradition described above. The focus is on proposing changes to the national Church structure so as to improve outcomes as measured by the Church leadership. Previous reports proposing to empower and motivate the laity are listed, but we are told that they

lacked clear implementation plans... There were no strategies for funding or resourcing, for how a programme would be championed and sustained, for winning ownership by Dioceses, for changing culture. There were no goals, or proposals for measurable outcomes, or means to review and reflect on progress (§2.1).

If this is not management-speak, nothing is. While continuing to use the language of the individual's inner spiritual life, the original point of which was that the spiritual life *cannot* be measured by secular techniques, the Report nevertheless expects to measure evangelistic work and provide resources accordingly.

In our research we have struggled to find insightful or systematic data on the demographics of lay people, on what they do Monday to Saturday in their primary fields of mission, on the pressures and challenges they face in their workplaces, and on what they perceive to be their development and formation needs. In short, there is a gaping hole in the Church's understanding of both its primary field of mission (Monday to Saturday workplaces and communities), and the awareness, confidence and effectiveness of its front-line 'workers' in these primary fields of mission (§3.2).

One wonders how much information they hope to get. Do they really think they could find out what all lay people do six days a week, together with all the pressures and challenges they face? One hopes they are just exaggerating to make the point. However, they continue by appealing to the common practice in organisations of investing resources in 'understanding stakeholders' to decide how to allocate resources. (§3.2). This would include 'surveys and action/learning approaches' and 'an annual "State of the Laity" review' (§4.2). More surveys. More forms to fill in. More officers to collate and summarise the results. More church bureaucrats misled into thinking that because they have read the statistics they know what is going on. More confidence by the people at the top that because they know so much, they are entitled to micromanage local church activities.

No doubt the Report's authors will deny that their case depends on presuming that all human behaviour is determined and observable. However it is precisely because human behaviour is *not* determined and observable by an élite that no amount of statistics-gathering can qualify them to micromanage the lives of ordinary people as they go about their business.

Alternative resourcing

What, then, would be a better way to promote a Christianity that engages with the whole of life? If we draw a line under the individualism and other-worldliness of the last 150 years, what next?

Distinguish theology from ethics

The way forward becomes clearer when we untangle the Report's tendency to mix up the organisational, the theological and the ethical. No Christian tradition has argued that there are different Christian theologies for clergy and laity, let alone for different occupational groups; but there are different *roles*, and therefore different ways to live

godly lives. Theology does not vary according to context but ethical and practical guidance does.

The role of the Church's leadership should be to ensure a high standard of theological education and debate. The aim should be well-informed teaching in every church, at least in the main weekly service. The laity should be offered up-to-date information on all the traditional theological topics: how the Bible was written, what the texts mean, what Jesus did and taught, how the Church has related its doctrines to the issues of the day, the different forms of prayer and meditation and so on – in general, what Christianity has to offer the world and why we think it is both true and important.

On ethical matters the contribution of church leaders is to be welcomed, but alongside the contributions of others. On many ethical issues, such as environmental protection, the Church has followed the lead of secular culture. In principle there is no reason why it should not, but it should admit that it is doing so.

The idea of expecting all the necessary resources to be provided within the Church is therefore pointless as well as unrealistic. Church leaders have no monopoly on moral guidance and should not expect to provide comprehensive advice. Instead, lay Christians should be given better theological resources by the Church while being encouraged to make use of secular resources as and when appropriate.

Among the Church's leaders there should therefore be a much higher proportion of theologians skilled at publicly relating up-to-date theology to current issues and lifestyles – a task which until a generation ago was a characteristic role of bishops. By informing the laity and leaving it up to them to judge how to use the information, they would indeed 'set God's people free' from the culture of control which the Report in effect affirms.

Recognise diversity

Instead of a dualist view of humanity divided between Christians and everybody else, we should celebrate our diversity. Dualistic accounts of humanity can lead to tribalistic hostilities. Even when they do not, they can lead Christians to ignore information and advice from people they do not consider to be Christians.

Modern Church welcomes the diversity of human skills and lifestyles as an enriching part of society. Christians and non-Christians alike vary in their beliefs, change their minds and have doubts which wax and wane. Those who identify themselves as Christians may agree with some doctrines while rejecting others. They may feel strongly committed one day but have doubts the next. A realistic approach to mission and discipleship will accept these ups and downs as normal.

Encourage public debate

Instead of using language implying that 'the biblical story' and Christian doctrine are a seamless whole, Church leaders should openly acknowledge the different Christian theologies and their different practical implications.

Secular ethicists debate whether ethics is an autonomous discipline or derivative. Most Christians expect to derive their ethical norms from their theology. Thus traditional Christian ethical teaching varies for two kinds of reason. One is context; a good nurse will not do the same things as a good bank manager. The other is the theological basis. For example, a Christian who emphasises God's omnipotence is more likely to believe that God has designed us for well-being, so starvation and war indicate that somebody is doing something wrong. As a moral priority, the hungry should be fed and war should be avoided. Similarly the natural environment is God's gift to us, to be valued and protected. By contrast, a Christian who emphasises the devil's ability to limit God's power may believe that the physical world is fallen, and deduce that Christians have a proper role in altering the natural environment and supporting economic growth even at the expense of making the poor poorer.

The Report is far from being the first Christian document to aspire to a comprehensive account of what lay people should do. For many centuries Roman Catholic casuists set out to lay down detailed ethical rules, based on thorough analysis of the relevant principles. Anglican theologians have responded in different ways. Some have developed Anglican versions of it. Others have proposed sets of moral rules based on selected biblical texts. Others again have followed Luther's emphasis on justification by faith rather than good works.

Modern Church believes that Church leaders should not attempt to micromanage people's ethical judgements. The right thing to do in any situation often depends in part on one's theology, but also on other information which Christians share with non-Christians. Rather than confining their ethical deliberations to their communities of fellow-believers, Christians should take part in public discourse, willing both to contribute and to learn.

Evangelise when appropriate

When the Report argues that Christians need more theological resources, it does so not to help them decide their priorities for themselves, but specifically to help them in their evangelism and discipleship. From this it follows that the resources must come from the Church. In this sense its dualism leads to a power grab on behalf of the Church's leadership.

When people are encouraged or expected to engage in dedicated projects of evangelism – when, for example, they are persuaded to stand in city centres and address passers-by, or given bursaries to go abroad specifically in order to evangelise – they are being put in an artificial situation. The evangelist feels obliged to do what one would not do to a friend. The evangelism becomes stilted. This kind of activity has indeed made some converts, but at the price of driving far greater numbers further away from Christianity, as Linda Woodhead's research has shown.³ In a great deal of British culture, a Christian is

³ 'What affected the churches in Britain, however, and accelerated the rise of 'no religion', was a volte face by church leaders in nearly all the major British denominations after the 1970s, which saw them move in a more conservative direction and

someone to be despised and avoided because the stereotypical Christian is a pushy intruder wanting to talk about their faith. It is telling that the Report shows no awareness of this widespread negative effect, despite its proposal to make more resources available for it.

Evangelistic activity at its best comes naturally and does not require any dedicated projects. Anybody with a faith can talk with friends and colleagues, as and when they judge it appropriate, about what they believe and how it affects their lives. To do this well, what they need from church leaders is not 'evangelistic' or 'discipleship' resources but *theological* resources. When they understand what Christianity is, and have thought through for themselves what it means to them, they are better placed to explain it to others in a convincing manner. In general, when people do not feel under pressure to talk about their faith it becomes easier to say what seems appropriate at the time without being pushy.

Minimise management

Modern Church therefore proposes a lighter touch. The Church leadership, instead of demanding more data from parishes and giving instructions in return, should focus on public descriptions of what Christianity is, why they think it is true and why they think it matters.

This will require admitting the wide range of beliefs among Christians and the fuzzy edges between Christians and non-Christians.

The ethical implications of Christian theologies should be openly discussed and debated by church leaders without claiming a monopoly on advice for Christians.

How the Church should be managed is a question which is best answered at the most local practical level. National Church leaders should resist the temptation to give more instructions to parishes than absolutely necessary.

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on behalf of Modern Church

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take an increasingly vocal stand against ethical liberalisation, especially in relation to gender and sexuality... It is not just that Britain has become less religious but that religion has become more so; not just that people moved away from the churches but that the churches moved away from them.' Woodhead, Linda, 'The rise of "no religion" in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', <http://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/11%20Woodhead%201825.pdf>, p. 256.