Review: Setting God's People Free – A Report from the Archbishops' Council



"This report concludes that what needs to be addressed is not a particular theological or ecclesiastical issue but the Church's overall culture. This is a culture that over-emphasises the distinction between the sacred and the secular and therefore fails to communicate the all-encompassing scope of the whole-life good news and to pursue the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to make whole-life maturing disciples. We will not raise up cadres of godly leaders unless we create communities of whole-life disciples." (Page 2)

The Archbishops' Council has released this report under the *Renewal & Reform* agenda. Hot off the presses (it is dated February 2017) it is refreshingly and provocatively titled "Setting God's People Free" and is based primarily on the work of the Lay Leadership Task Group. It is perceptive in outlook, insightful in analysis, but self-admittedly limited in application. It provokes a degree of excitement with just a hint of cynicism.

From my "outsider" perspective, reports like these from the Church of England have stimulated and encouraged mission and discipleship in other contexts. This was the case with significant works such as *Mission-Shaped Church.* It is similar here; the leadership of the church is saying what needs to be said, giving a voice and lending language to those who desire a deeper Christian community that is more active and effective in doing the things that matter. The simple *encouragement* that this gives to those on the edge cannot be

underestimated.

With my slowly developing "inside" view, these documents now seem a little starker. It is still immensely encouraging that these things are being said, but there is also an awareness of why they *need* to be said. A report like this reveals behind (or in front of) it some sense of the inertial malaise that can be found in the Church of England. It envelopes a justifiable sense of *urgency.*

So what does this report give us? It's not really anything revolutionary. It's a couple of things that make deep sense, and, if taken seriously, come attached with a whole bunch of difficult but positive implications:

> *This report identifies the need for **two shifts in culture and practice** that we see as critical to the flourishing of the Church and the evangelisation of the nation.*
>
> ***1. Until, together, ordained and lay, we form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never set God's people free to evangelise the nation.***
>
> ***2. Until laity and clergy are convinced, based on their baptismal mutuality, that they are equal in worth and status, complementary in gifting and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission, we will never form Christian communities that can evangelise the nation.***
>
> *We believe that these two shifts would represent a seismic revolution in the culture of the Church. The first is about the focus of our activity and the scope of our mission, the second is about the nature of the relationship between clergy and lay. They are both vital. And they are both rare.*
> *(Page 2, emphasis theirs)*

This is an exemplary act of ecclesial self-reflection. These

assertions about church culture are based on some decent quantitative and qualitative analysis. It is a conversation that is well and truly at the missional and cultural level. Personally speaking, we have been bewildered in our observation and experience of how these issues are usually avoided or mishandled. This includes misalignment over the meaning of crucial language such as "discipleship" and "mission." This report not only clarifies terms ("Discipleship is not a course of study but is determined by circumstances", page 7) but unpacks what that clarity reveals:

> *Today… the Church of England finds itself in a situation where the significant majority of the 98% of people who are not in ordained ministry are neither adequately envisioned, nor appropriately trained, nor consistently prayed for, nor enthusiastically encouraged for mission nor ministry in the ~90% of their waking lives that they do not spend in church related actitivites. (Page 3)*

> *Yes, huge numbers of lay people serve in positions of influence and leadership in the church, community, workplace and society. However, few claim to have been given a theological framework or to have the confidence to express biblical wisdom, in both word and deed, in these contexts. We will not raise up cadres of fruitful godly leaders in every sphere unless we create healthy communities of whole-life disciple-making disciples. (Page 4)*

> ***What is needed, first and foremost, is not a programme but a change in culture**. A culture that communicates the all-encompassing scope of the good news for the whole of life, and pursues the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to form whole-life maturing disciples. And a culture that embodies in every structure and way of working the mutuality of our baptismal calling and the fruitful complementarity of our roles and vocations. (Page 5)*

> *Our contention is that the motivation for Christian leadership must arise not from a slightly greater willingness to 'do jobs' but from a compelling and positive vision of the redeeming work of Christ for all people. It is when people become aware of the great things that Christ has done for them and wake up to the gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on them that a joyful and willing leadership emerges, for it is out of communities of disciples that cadres of leaders will appear. (Page 8)*

To all this I give an understated Anglican "Amen, brothers and sisters!" Here is a vision for a missional church that resonates with our own hopes and passions.

It is not an unrealistic vision. The report is aware of "constraining factors" and rightly names as primary a "theological deficit" (page 13) of "robust and incisive… thinking" (page 14). The counter offer is a "theology of the laity as grounded in the centrality of *mission* and *evangelism*" (page 14) made with full awareness that parochialism and other factors work to prevent such vision from "achieving long-term currency, let alone significantly informing policy and practice across the Church of England" (page 14).

> *Mission is not about removing people from the world to seek refuge in the Church… 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. (Page 14).*

I am sympathetic to, but not entirely yet convinced by, the engagement with the clerical-lay divide as a primary problem. The report portrays both sides of the frustration and that is useful: some congregations try to make their clergy into messiahs, some clergy already think they are! Nevertheless, the engagement with the issue assumes and perhaps unhelpfully reinforces the division. **After all, the clergy are a *subset* of**

the laity, not a separate category. And one of the problems in our formation of clergy is that we don't also (and especially) *disciple them as people*. A discipleship culture is rarely prevented by a lack of theological knowledge; it is resisted when leaders are unable to share of themselves because of insecurities, fears, emotional immaturity, inexperience with suffering, or simple lack of exposure to the deeper things of life with Jesus.

> *Few churches have developed the kind of learning culture that would illuminate the resource and support that is required to develop lay people. Few churches are equipped with the kind of 'action reflection' approaches that we see in Jesus' disciple-making and in best practice adult learning models in wider society. (Page 18)*

Good reports make recommendations and here "eight levels of cultural change" are proposed (page 19). They are only really applicable to "Dioceses and the National Church", which is understandable as these are the atomic ecclesial components from the point of view of the Archbishops' Council. I am not particularly familiar with the sort of machinations that happen at that level, but the principles seem sound: theological vision, increased lay voice, episcopal priorities, centralised resourcing, liturgical development, structural reform and so on. I'll be watching the commentary on these things with some interest.

There are two recommendations for action in the short-term that attract me. The selection of "pilot dioceses" (page 26) to model the culture has me hoping that my own Diocese of Oxford will be one! And, the provision of resources through a "national portal" (page 26), particularly "the facility for people to join small affinity/learning groups for support, discussion, and accountability" recognises a crucial lack of communal learning that *should* be happening at Parish, Deanery and Diocesean level, but usually isn't.

The emphasis remains however: *cultural change is required.* And that is a fraught exercise.

I have sat on enough boards and committees in my time to understand that clarifying the situation and identifying the problem is one thing; putting forward achievable and appropriate proposals is another. This is only amplified when the problem is a cultural one. There is always an aspect of catch-22 and chicken-or-egg. How do we use culture to change culture? Are the available options – the levers that can be pulled – able to *transcend* the culture or are they products *of* it?

There are all manner of obstacles to cultural change. It will take more than this report to overcome them.

For instance, cultural change is resisted by allowing symptoms to control the remedy. Our natural tendency is to alleviate symptoms, and it is often not efficacious. Consider how the report points out that there is "no sense of any centrally-coordinated strategy for the support and development of lay leaders across the Church" (Page 11). This is clearly a symptom of something that's wrong. But it may not follow that the answer is to rely on a "centrally coordinated strategy." Rather, it is likely that cultural change is achieved by some other means, which then *results* in a centrally-coordinated strategy. What comes first? Here, while not wanting to "institute a top down approach" (page 1) we still have a "clear implementation plan" (page 9) from a high-level body! Catch-22.

In general, there are other obstacles to cultural change. There is the presumptive existent: "We exist, therefore we're on the right course." There is semantic deflection: "Of course we're doing X; when *we* do it it looks like…" By embracing the buzzwords the real engagement is avoided. We've seen this happen with words such as "discipleship", "fresh expression", "leadership", "vision", "mission", and

“emerging”. Cynicism can easily abound.

I’m not sure the report totally avoids these obstacles. For instance, in trying to articulate a picture of lay ministry in terms of the “sent church” there is an emphasis on volunteerism. However, as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, there is often a cultural disconnect between the social action of individual parishioners and the movement and mission of the church to which they belong. The report mentions Street Pastors (page 10), but how much can we say that that ministry belongs to the institutional Church? There is a danger of stealing the fruit of others in order to avoid our own barrenness.

Nevertheless, I was both encouraged and moved by this paper. I am grateful to know that people are thinking these thoughts, and even dreaming these dreams. It’s the right conversation in the right room, and it speaks a vision that needs to spread to every room in this House of God.