WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LAITY?

2015 Annual Cathedral Lecture, Chester Cathedral February 7th 2015

Canon Professor Elaine Graham

---

1. Introduction: a joyful consecration, a timely opportunity and a sense of déjà vu

The consecration of Libby Lane as Bishop of Stockport at the end of last month has occasioned much rejoicing within the Church of England and beyond. It is undoubtedly an historic occasion and comes, as many commentators noted, over twenty years after the first women were ordained priest and after many more years of campaigning on behalf of the parity of women and men in ordained ministry. As with the ordination of women in 1994, Bishop Libby's consecration has also been welcomed by wider society as a sign that the Church might be taking its first steps towards greater equality.

But - without wishing in the least to detract from the significance of this much anticipated, greatly overdue and hugely uplifting event (especially for this Diocese), I find myself wondering whether these events have been at the expense of other debates within the church; and that such a focus on inclusive leadership amongst the clergy and episcopate has had unfortunate, unintended, consequences elsewhere.

Before you misunderstand me, let me clarify. I wonder whether the preoccupation of many of the churches – not just the Church of England – over recent times with questions of gender and

sexuality in relation to who is and is not permitted to be ordained has been at the expense of other, equally fundamental questions about the very nature of the church's ministry overall. And whilst they may not ostensibly appear quite so damaging to the churches' reputation amongst an increasingly baffled and uncomprehending general public, this is nevertheless an area in which the very credibility of the Gospel is being subtly, wordlessly and yet irrevocably undermined.

So maybe it's time – and not before time – that we turned our attention to the question of the role of the laity and the work they do as members of the Church in the world. And lurking behind the question that forms the title of my lecture is the sense that certainly in modern times, if not throughout Christian history, people have been asking the same question: what about the laity? Who *are* the laity? Whatever *happened to* the laity? That time and again, successive generations say, isn't it time that we returned to the question of the laity as more than those who are 'non-ordained' and think positively and constructively about the nature of their duties and callings as Christians?

Well, help is at hand. In January, the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England announced a series of far-reaching reforms to its structures of finance, governance and training. Amongst these is a commitment to "a debate on encouraging the discipleship of the whole people of God as the foundation for re-imagining ministry for the 21st century" (GS 1977, Developing Discipleship, § 3) Well, that certainly sounds promising: and as I'll show, all the right language is there: 'whole people of God', very good; 're-imagining ministry' , splendid; '21st century' - always

helpful to be in the right century; 'discipleship' – well, we'll come back to that one. However, this review would appear to be a timely initiative, prompted by an awareness of the needs of a changing society, the challenges of a shrinking and ageing active Church membership and financial pressures. This is probably the kind of review of a Church's priorities that should happen in every generation; but I don't know whether to be reassured at the familiarity of all this talk of discipleship as being the property of the whole Church, that all are called regardless of status (§ 6), that the task of being a disciple is 'to be called to live a distinctive life of witness and service … sent into the world, to follow God's call' (§8; §16), that the Church is always a learning church (§ 7) and that discipleship is the shared undertaking of lay and ordained Christians together(§ 20) – or indeed, to have a sinking sense of déjà vu. Hasn't all this been said before? If so, then why does it still have to be restated as if these were newly-minted discoveries?

Because if truth be told, all the churches ecumenically speaking have been talking explicitly about discipleship of the whole people of God, of God on Monday as well as Sunday, of drawing no distinction between lay ministry within the Church and the secular vocation or discipleship of baptised Christians in the world, since the mid-C20th. But lamentably, it's been a sporadic conversation that has never really, as this report puts it, 'fully absorbed into the lifeblood and culture of our Church' (§ 37).

In fact, this document frankly and lucidly puts its finger on the problem when it admits, 'The Church of England has not devoted a great deal of time and energy to reflection on the

discipleship [of] the whole people of God in recent times' (§ 34) … 'Our vision for the Church and for discipleship is not as clear as it could be … Where do we find a compelling vision for lay discipleship in the world? Our understanding of service becomes restricted to the life of the Church … there has been some reflection on licensed lay ministry but very little on the service offered by the majority of Christians for the majority of tie through their discipleship.' (§ 38). As a result, it says, '… the witness and the mission of the whole Church is impoverished as Christians are neither encouraged nor sustained in the living out of their Christian faith in daily life.' (§38)

So there's our challenge. Perhaps the churches have had other unfinished business; but now the opportunity comes – and similarly mirrored in other Christian denominations as well – to return to this question: as this report puts it, to embark on a 'new theological conversation on discipleship and ministry' in order to take the Church forward. In this lecture, I'd like to help us to do some of that thinking, and to ask what our priorities should be. Why, despite successive waves of innovative, exciting debate towards a theology of the laity, does it still seem such a neglected area? Why has theological reflection on the laity been afforded such low priority – and even when it has taken place, why has it not proved of lasting and sustainable impact?

2. So: whatever happened to the laity?

1. Where are the resources for a theology of the laity? [Bring together wisdom of the past through historical perspectives; analysis of the challenges of our contemporary context]

2. What has prevented it from taking root in the Church's consciousness? [Analysis of power, collusion and resistance]

3. What factors might inform a contemporary theological conversation about the laity?
   (a) The challenges facing the Church today? (Decline of institutional religion and a post-Christian culture alongside resurgence of fascination in 'spirituality'; these must cause us to think about new ways of being Church?)

   (b) How can those of us who are committed lay people foster everyday vocations as members of the Body of Christ in the world? Here, I will conclude by arguing that whilst we are long overdue to have a theology of the laity, we also need the courage to lay hold of a theology *for* the laity – one that nurtures 'spiritual intelligence' and 'practical wisdom'; a way of life that equips us to undertake the journey of faith, that serves as a compass to orientate us in the midst of a complex and changing world.

3. Whatever Happened to the Laity? Historical perspectives

The ecumenical theologian Hans-Ruedi Weber has argued that 'Laity is not a Biblical word', a claim that alerts us right from the start that we must be careful not to assume that words we use today have always meant the same thing (Weber, 1997). So whilst the Greek term *laos* (*λαος*), meaning 'the people of God' (*laos tou theou*) is certainly a Biblical concept, it doesn't map neatly onto our structures of bishops, presbyters, clergy, deacons, lay readers, etc. There's clearly an historical evolution whereby the early Church is initially not ordered by a special priestly class, as had been the case with Judaism, but gradually leaders of worship and members of religious communities were set apart from other members.

But that process of differentiation is always tempered by the understanding that the people of God does indeed embrace everyone, regardless of status or office. Furthermore, it doesn't just mean 'people' in a general sense, but as in covenanted, or chosen people. Initially, Israel is called out from among the nations to serve as 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation', representing the world to God and God to the world (Kraemer, 1958, p. 155). So the idea of the 'priesthood of all believers' is rooted in Biblical understandings of the priestly and kingly office of Jesus – in baptism Christians take on the incarnational and sacrificial ministry of Jesus. Priesthood entails mediation, intercession, reconciliation and sacrifice; but this is the quality of the whole people as the Body of Christ and not just something conferred at or by ordination.

So it's certainly true that 'laos' denotes the whole Church, although Hans-Ruedi Weber's school of thought argues it's more fruitful to trace our word 'laity' back to the Greek word *laikos*, which is already there by the end of the first century (1 Clement, 96CE), and which carries the sense of those not clergy or religious – almost 'profane' as one who stood outside the temple. It is the distinction between those who are in the world rather than concerned with the ministry of word and sacrament. But the concept of the people of God is always primary, I think – and even when the Church community is institutionalised into a hierarchical structure, that fundamental idea remains, that whatever the function or specific role Christians carry out, it is as part of one body and one common relationship in Christ. But keeping the notion of 'the people of God' at the forefront should also remind us that when we think of the Christian vocation of the ordinary lay person, we are talking about something that is not personal, or interior or private, but something that comes by virtue of being 'incorporated', to a community: to the body of Christ, the people of God – usually through baptism. Insofar as all baptised Christians share in the work of representing and offering the world to God, everyone does indeed share in the priesthood of all believers.

But of course, the shape of the Church has evolved and developed in many different directions over the centuries; and part of that historical evolution has been the emergence of a separate class of 'clergy' as appointed and specially trained officials, set apart (Neill and Weber, eds. 1963). In his *Theology of the Laity* published in 1958 the Dutch Reformed theologian Hendrik Kraemer provides a series of snap-shots of the history of the laity, pointing to significant historical moments of lay initiative and activity that have decisively shaped the Church. For example, the emergence of the monastic movement from the fourth century to the middle

ages included many ‘lay’ religious whose primary function was not liturgical but pastoral or charitable, within the community.

Many of the radical movements of the middle ages, such as the Lollards and the Waldensians were strongly lay initiatives, as were early modern movements like the Society of Friends and other radical dissenters. The leaders of the Reformation argued that no ecclesiastical or clerical mediation was needed for access to Word or sacrament (hence the corresponding emphasis, alongside doctrine of priesthood of believers, on unmediated access to Scripture, including translation into vernacular languages and universal literacy). Access to education – basic literacy - in order to be able to read the Bible for oneself is a condition of a person’s salvation; but of course it contributes to the empowerment of the laity in other ways too. The liberation of the Word is also the liberation of the laity (Lovegrove, 2002).

The eighteenth century was a time of great religious revival, again emphasising the immediacy of salvation through the unconditional grace of God, through Scripture and religious experience itself, such as evangelical conversion: the Methodists, Pietism, the great awakening in the U.S. But I think the most important seeds are only sown towards the end of the C19th, which shape our contemporary understanding of a largely professional clergy ranked against/above/alongside a secular class of laity.

And there were a number of factors, I think, that began to emerge from the last quarter of the C19th into the early C20th which have, more than anything, shaped our modern context for lay ministry. They reflect changes in modern Western culture as well as within Church life.

So, for example, the C19th in Europe saw the beginnings of the transfer of the Church's functions of welfare, education, health care and law to specialist departments of government and the State. This represented the severing of an organic connection between ecclesiastical and secular , and with it the loss of a crucial route by which ordinary lay church members might exercise a philanthropic vocation – through campaigning for reform, or supporting those in need within society at large.

The growth in overseas missions from Western churches to what we'd now call the global South also fuelled a terrific eruption of energy amongst lay people, volunteering as doctors, teachers, engineers, and so on. Movements like the Student Volunteer Missionary Movement (later the Student Christian Movement), the YMCA and YWCA, Frontier Trust – these were ecumenical in outlook, and often independent of denominational structures, although of course most of the mainstream churches from Europe and North America sent missionaries. These people returned home often with a global understanding of the world Church beyond Christendom and through overseas mission a sharp sense of the encounter between Christianity and other faiths. And often this developed into an interest in how Western culture, which was already showing signs of secularisation, could itself be 'evangelised' - as in this quotation from Kathleen Bliss, writing in the 1960s:

> '… mission was no longer to geographical areas of the world: it must be to a culture becoming world-wide. "World" began to assume a new meaning. "The Church in the world" meant not only the Church on the map but the Church in a world of men [sic] and institutions – political, economic and social – which had become (in the proper sense of the word) "autonomous", a law to themselves. The era of domination of every area of life by the ecclesiastical institution was long since over, and with it the crippling restriction on human freedom and creativity. From a relationship of domination, the Church passed by successive stages to one of dwindling and often ineffectual contact with large areas of the life of society, especially those areas which were new.' (Bliss, 1963, p. 52)

And of course throughout the C20th in the West, the spread of education meant that church leaders – local and national – were working with more articulate and better-qualified 'laity' – either those with experience of international church or in positions of responsibility in community, workplace, political life. Inevitably, these laity demanded more from their parish or congregation (although this proved to be a moot point, as we'll see), and with it a more satisfactory theology of the laity.

So a theology of the laity that begins to emerge from the middle of the C20th was conditioned by the emergence of that modern world, with its separation of the Church into a specialist compartment of life, a more educated and globally-aware laity, and the beginnings of a sense of the removal of the Church from the centre of people's consciousness. It was the end of Christendom, the beginnings of religious pluralism, the demarcation of life into work and leisure, the distinction between public life of government, economy, market – and the things of reason, science and industry - and the private life of home, family and childhood – associated with a world of religion, the affections, intimacy. That's why I really want to draw on voices

that emerge from the beginnings of the C20th as most relevant for us today (Kraemer, 1958, pp. 25-36).

Within the generation that began to emerge in the C20th we see more positive intellectual trends that also feed into a theology of the laity. There is an emphasis on incarnational, world-affirming theologies: of mission to 'a world come of age' that will require serious intellectual engagement with and incarnational solidarity alongside the currents of human history. There are also new critical approaches to understanding church: impact of sociological and historical understandings of church as human institution, as contingent on historical structures, but now informed by new theological visions of people of God, Body of Christ, spirit-filled community that transcended and rejuvenated traditional patterns of thinking and organizing.

4. The heyday: 1945-1985

There's a strong connection with the emergence of the modern ecumenical movement after 1945 and a more intentional attention to the role of the laity. That's because a lot of the major movers behind the drive for greater church unity came out of the world missionary movements, and also denominational organizations that were beginning to make sense of the new industrial and urban conditions in Europe and North America. These energies came to fruition between the 1940s and 1960s, only really falling away in the 1980s which is why I want to focus on this period as offering some of the most significant thinking.

We the People (1963)

Kathleen Bliss' professional formation was typical of that emerging group of lay people I've just described: she was a lay professional in the church, initially as a theological educator in India, inspired by J.H. Oldham and early pioneers of the ecumenical movement; then for the Church of England Board of Education.

Her short paperback, *We the People*, published in 1963 by SCM Press, brings together much of what was being said in Protestant circles at this time, and bears the traces of those earlier themes – a sense of the global nature of Christianity and the need to transpose what had been learned from mission to historically non-Christian cultures back to a nominally Christian but secularizing West; an awareness of the untapped potential of articulate, confident lay expertise available to the churches; that the role of the laity transcended other confessional or denominational differences not least because in terms of 'mission' to those outside the churches these distinctions mattered little.

Throughout, Bliss stresses the double reality of the church: its creation as 'divine community' as the Body of Christ, the spirit-filled community; and its material existence as social institution, 'cast out upon the world' as she puts it (Bliss, 1963, p. 10). For lay people, that tension encapsulates the double aspect of their lives as Christians living between the 'gathered' Church in parish or congregation and the 'scattered' Church, which is in, but not of, the world (Bliss, 1963, p. 29).

Whilst Bliss is confident that these dual aspects must be held together, she is adamant, I think, that one cannot overshadow or substitute the other. She is a keen advocate for lay leadership in matters of worship and preaching; as elders, or teachers, or participating in church governance (Bliss, 1963, pp. 22-28). She is aware of the ways forms of responsible lay leadership within a congregation –tasks such as magazine delivery, Sunday school teaching or a music group – can easily prolong their life-time, such that, in her words, '"jobs" have hardened into "offices"' (Bliss, 1963, p. 25). Equally, she puts her finger on something when she complains that much of what passes for training in local churches commits exactly this error of believing that carrying out Church jobs more efficiently is a substitute for enabling the laity to fulfil their worldly vocation to the best of their ability. She says, 'For what the laity lack is not the know-how of successful magazine distribution [might we say web-site design today?], but basic equipment in understanding what it means to be a Christian.' (Bliss, 1963, p. 26)

That's very significant: *what the laity lack is … basic equipment in understanding what it means to be a Christian*. Are the laity provided with the Christian education, the theological literacy (to match the ability to read the Bible in the vernacular?) with which to make sense of their faith?

And apart from the non-inclusive language, Bliss' sense of the dawning of a post-Christian culture, of the church beginning to slip away from popular opinion and of the need to bridge the gap between Christian sub-culture and the mainstream, may seem very prescient to us even now:

> 'All the laity of all churches are in a common situation in the world. Wherever he works, wherever he meets the community at large, he finds that Christians are in a minority. His faith comes under fire or is ignored, or even pitied. He is regarded often as a relic of the past. When he goes to church that past comes alive, he hears, speaks and sings its language with sincerity and it becomes for him a vehicle of eternal realities. But he is conscious, acutely or vaguely, that all sorts of ideas about man and the world, hidden in the words, are of the past, belonging to a pastoral or patriarchal society, and to a triple-decker view of the universe. Instead of making sense of the world for him, the Christian's faith, couched in this language, is often a problem he himself is trying to make sense of. Yet he needs it to guide and sustain him in the world.' (Bliss, 1963, p. 30)

That sense, of being caught between two cultures, between a secularising society and a beleaguered church, and lacking the resources and understanding to 'make sense', let alone help others interpret the gap, is I think one of the keynotes of Bliss' argument.

God's Frozen People, 1963

Another name closely associated with the post-war movement in Europe to mobilize the laity to carry their faith into secular areas of society was Mark Gibbs (1920-86) a school-teacher based in Audenshaw, in Greater Manchester. Gibbs had been active in a number of post-war lay movements, including the international committee of the German *Kirchentag*, the Christian Frontier Council and the Iona Community. His book, *God's Frozen People*, co-written with T. Ralph Morton[1], and published in 1964, was effectively a manifesto for the empowerment of the laity – whom he defined as Christians 'who are committed to God's will as revealed in Jesus Christ, and to that will not only on Sunday and in our private religion, not only in church affairs, but also in the whole spectrum of our lives' activities.' (Vos, 2009, p. 23)

[1] Church of Scotland minister and deputy leader of Iona Community.

But the church has become ossified – 'frozen' in to a 'holy huddle' such that it has forgotten that it is there to serve the needs of those outside:

'[I]f there has to be a choice between upsetting some of God's faithful veterans in the congregations or failing to serve some of God's frozen and lonely people on the fringe of our churches, then it seems to us clear which is the choice we must make, according to all that the New Testament teaches.' (Gibbs and Morton, 1964, p. 9) The church has failed to articulate or build a sufficiently robust theology of the laity because it has been too pre-occupied with its own maintenance and so fails to value any alternative forms of lay ministry that do not take place on its own premises.

Together Morton and Gibbs founded the Audenshaw Foundation, which published series after series of papers on questions of economics, politics and social responsibility.[2] In later work, Gibbs would talk about the laity's Sunday ministries – people's congregational or liturgical responsibilities – which needed to be complemented by attention to the demands of Monday ministries – home, family, work, politics – and also Saturday ministries – 'the involvement of Christians in the structures of leisure – vacations, tourism, entertainment, sports, television.' (Vos, 2009, p. 123) But to the end of his life in 1986, Gibbs argued that the leadership of the churches 'from the Pope down' were failing to listen and appreciate the need for a theologically literate, capable and proactive laity.

[2] The archive is now lodged at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester: http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/searchresources/guidetospecialcollections/atoz/audenshawfoundationarchive/

> ‘We need laity who are able to handle questions of belief and of scepticism, and questions which criticize both society and church. And laity who are able to handle questions of ambiguity and compromise (by which the world is run).’ (Gibbs, 1981, p. 2)

Vatican II 1962-65

I move now away from Protestant writers to a Roman Catholic body: the second Vatican Council, convened by John XXIII and responsible for some remarkably innovative thinking. Of course, this was essentially a conclave of (male) Bishops and cardinals; but in those preparing the documents, there were a number of theologians who were doing fresh thinking about the nature of the church; the challenges of contemporary culture; the need to depart from a hierarchical model of church order – and orders of ministry – towards a more participatory and collegial vision (Lakeland, 2009) (Phillips, 2014).

Throughout the conciliar documents there is a tension, between the Church represented as a hierarchical institution, with established, divinely-constituted orders of ministry and authority even whilst being cast as a spirit-filled, pilgrim people characterised by ‘a universal call to holiness’ (Lakeland, 2009, p. 149), (Höbel, 2002, pp. 59-64) It’s the latter vision that the Council is attempting to realize, however, and trying to bury traditional understandings of a division between the powerful clergy and a passive laity, towards an understanding of there being one baptism, one common calling, one Church, which is united in mission to the modern world. (Vatican II, 1964 [1981])

One of the major influences on the Council was the French theologian Yves Congar (Congar, 1955), (Lakeland, 2004). He argued that such a vision of the Church as the people of God and of the Church in the world implied two main things: a mature and theologically literate laity who must be nurtured in a spirituality of discernment and transformation; and a Church informed and shaped by a 'prophetic awareness of what it means to be human' rather than the defence of 'clerical authority' (Phillips, 2014, p. 591). We can see these threads woven, I think, through many of the Council's pronouncements.

So, for example, in a document on the lay apostulate, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965), the role of the laity is decisively located within the life of secular society. Furthermore, this will require a particular kind of adult formation and training in the faith. It echoes that earlier quote from Mark Gibbs, calling for forms of theological understanding amongst the laity that enable them to navigate their way through life's complexities - for discernment and confidence in bringing faith to bear on everyday issues. Lay people, says the Council, need the skills to enable them:

> 'to learn gradually and prudently to see all things in the light of faith, to judge and act always in its light, to improve and perfect oneself by working with others, and in this manner to enter actively into the service of the Church. Inasmuch as the human person is continuously developing and new problems are forever arising, this education should be steadily perfected; it requires an ever more thorough knowledge and a continual adaptation of action.' (AA §29 (Flannery, 1981, p. 794))

In C21st terms, we might call this 'life-long learning'; or theology as a form of "practical wisdom", and I will return to this at the end.

Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 1965, presents perhaps the most positive and world-affirming theology of the Council. It focuses on the nature of the human person, the world and society; it talks of a mutuality between Church and world, the need to respond appropriately to social change and to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit within, and not against, such secular developments. The vision is of 'A World to be Built up and Brought to Fulfilment' (GS §93, p. 1001): and this represents an unprecedented spirit of openness (*aggiornamento*) towards the cultures of human creativity such as the arts, technologies and science. This affirmation of the movement of the Holy Spirit within the 'secular' world signals an important reorientation. But this world-affirming theology has implications for ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) also. It means that the laity stands at the vanguard of this response of the Church in and to the world.

Once again, this is about the practice of discernment, of being able to reinterpret the teachings of tradition for a changing context in order to put them into practice and, crucially, communicate them to a world that is no longer universally Christian (if it ever was). Witness and evangelisation are not one-way monologues, but conversations with the world. Only by listening to the questions posed by the world, can the Church hope to have a credible message in return:

> 'At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live.' (GS, § 4, p. 905)

As the Asian Roman Catholic theologian Peter Phan has argued, we can interpret the documents of Vatican II as shifting from a church-centred, hierarchical model towards one of the people of God, the body of Christ, with a focus on the Church not as an end in itself – whose mission is its own survival – but as an instrument or sacrament of God's presence, through Christ, in human history. Phan characterises pre-conciliar Catholic missiology as one in which 'the center and heart of the missionary project is the church, and church understood primary in the institutional model' (2002). But for Phan, Vatican II simply turns that sequence of priorities on its head, so that 'reign of God, mission, proclamation, and church' (Phan, 2002) become the proper priorities of ministry and mission: in other words, what matters is God (in Jesus Christ), world, church in that order.

Since Vatican II, and especially under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Roman Catholic Church has arguably returned to a more centralized and clericalised state, in which that balance between the institution and the spirit-filled community has tilted back towards the magisterium. Under Pope Francis, however, we may see new signs of a more conciliar, certainly more globally-minded regime; and of course his emphasis on the activist church, in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, may also have far-reaching implications for a renewed lay apostolate.

One final mention of a report produced, once again, by the Church of England in the mid-1980s – but as much to underline how short people's memories were. Twenty years after these ground-breaking discussions, in a report entitled *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity*,

1985, a working party of the Board of Education finds itself commenting that the laity 'have been theologically out of sight and out of mind' (p. 13), and having to go back to square one all over again. In so doing, it uses the familiar language of the people of God; all are called, regardless of ability or status, because our calling is bestowed by virtue of our all being made in the image of God and through the action of God's grace. The primary sacrament is baptism, as the sign of our new life in Christ and our common membership of the church.

5. … and where did it all go wrong?

It's salutary to observe how, 20 years after that wealth of ecumenical writing on the laity, *All are Called* (1985) finds itself essentially having to go back to the drawing-board. Indeed, it addresses the lack of progress of a theology of the laity and offers the following explanations. There is still a tendency to define laity as 'non-ordained' and to conceive lay ministry as derivative of or ancillary to the ordained functions of managing the church, rather than engaging with the secular task of transforming the world. There is a conservatism towards church structures, confusing them with divine edict rather than historical evolution, with a corresponding unwillingness to change. They are critical of what they see as the self-fulfilling power of the clergy – in the face of secularization and loss of status, the tendency is to reinforce the marks of institutional power; a proliferation of clergy offices and privileges as a defence against the loss of purpose and identity lends further inertia.

But around this time, there were also voices which suggested that it wasn't all simply about the clergy blocking the empowerment of the laity, and that in many cases lay people colluded with their own passivity, and chose not to challenge the disjunction between Sunday church and the life of Monday to Saturday. So the educationalist John Hull published a well-known book in the mid-1980s, entitled *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning*?

He argued that there are factors specific to Western modernity that inhibit adult Christian learning and which may actually cause lay people to collude with a passive and disenfranchised role. The privatisation of religion and its relegation to the margins of society means that it is associated by many with the private, domestic world of the family. The deep emotional connection between faith and childhood as the effect of infantilizing the faithful – back to the compartmentalisation of home and work, faith and reason, that I mentioned earlier. It is assumed that Christian learning is for children, that it is something they will outgrow, or that it is compartmentalised into the part of the week designated for our private retreats from the confusions of modernity, 'Saturday being devoted to the family and Sunday to the church.' (Hull, 1985, p. 8)

Actually, concludes John Hull, we like church better if it doesn't challenge us, because we get enough of that in the rest of our lives:

> 'Religion as a whole serves for many people as a haven from modernity. It is valued precisely because there one can escape from the problems and demands which crowd in upon us from the newspapers and the television.' (Hull, 1985, p. 7)

Many adults in the church choose to remain in a perpetual state of childishness, refusing to advance, to embrace the complexities of faith, refusing to learn, since 'Learning would have been confusing. Learning would have violated the simplicity of the haven.' (Hull, 1985, p. 10)

Let's return then, to evaluate how well these new proposals for General Synod to debate might address some of these challenges for a new (?) theology of the laity.

Developing Discipleship, 2015

The crucial question, and one that has excited much controversy, is whether these suggested reforms to the Church of England of which *Developing Discipleship* is a part are more interested in preserving the status quo than radically rethinking the nature of ministry. In her critique of the document, Linda Woodhead argues that there has been a damaging preoccupation with inter- or intra-ecclesiastical matters at the expense of the over-riding, bigger picture of the very viability of the Church in the face of radical threats to its long-term sustainability. But these are short-term solutions that are poor substitutes for clear thinking and root-and-branch reforms (Woodhead, 2015).

It is particularly telling, she observes, that amongst the chief priorities is a doubling of clergy vocations and better talent-spotting amongst middle and senior management, more resources for training for ordained ministry directed in the main to congregational positions. If clergy deployment has not arrested the decline of the church so far, what is to guarantee that more of the same will make things any different? Yet the very poverty of attention to the laity to

which *Developing Discipleship* alludes suggests that resourcing laity development, especially in their callings beyond the gathered church, would be a more genuinely fresh initiative – a greater risk, perhaps, but more radical.

Similarly, the shift in language from 'ministry' to 'discipleship' in *Developing Discipleship* is redolent of a return to a language of passivity, where, as Woodhead suggests, the leadership is equated with Jesus and the clergy, and discipleship with those who follow: he laity (p. 15). There's also an emphasis on 'making disciples' from Matthew 28, but again we have lost the understanding of evangelisation as entailing more than preaching and converting, but of sending as well as gathering (§ 8), and entailing 'the transformation of God's world in peace and justice' (§ 15). But there is a confusion within the document, which begins with that great commission from Matthew's gospel, of *making* disciples – which suggests mission, evangelism and making new Christians – and a theology of discipleship, or lay ministry as a process of 'life-long learning'.

Whilst the 'Ten Marks of a Diocese committed to developing disciples' reflects the importance of the model of the scattered church, the fact that they are channelled through conventional structures like dioceses runs the risk of reinforcing the gathered model, institutional mind-set. These may, of course, be new styles of congregations to be formed, such as within the Fresh Expressions movement, but this is still essentially about getting people to come in, to join, rather than trying to inhabit the places where, as Linda Woodhead put it in her critique, 'the rubber of Christianity hits the road of real life: in homes, playgroups, schools, and other places where children are socialised; in the occasional Offices, and the new personal and civic rituals that are developing; in railway stations, shopping centres, hospitals … in our built heritage, and

in cherished traditions.' (Woodhead, 2015, p. 15). Furthermore, in terms of missiology and ecclesiology, it is not as if the Church is not already present in these places, through lay people in their day-to-day roles as parents, workers, clients, users, managers and so on. The church is present, but those who represent 'the people of God' in those frontier places continue to feel unsupported and under-resourced:

> 'Some lay Christians feel the church fails to take seriously some of the roles they undertake beyond the church and their discipleship in the world. These Christians are not usually looking for affirmation in the form of any individual recognition. However many would welcome the opportunity to understand and reflect more on their discipleship, and would value some reassurance that their worth to God isn't only measured in terms of what they do in church.' (Church of England, 2011, §18, p. 7)

This document comes from one of the background papers for the discussion process around *Developing Discipleship*, and originates in the Church's Ministry Division and its Mission and Public Affairs Division. But whilst official church pronouncements by what John Atherton used to call its 'social curia' and indeed by Bishops and church leaders are an important part of the churches' 'public theology' (Graham and Lowe, 2009, pp. 4-5), we also need to get into the mind-set where we automatically realise that the presence of lay people, day-to-day, in secular institutions, is also a vital part of the church's engagement in 'mission and public affairs'.[3]

It is not as if there are not precedents for these kinds of strategies. After all, in parallel to the literature on the laity to which I've already alluded, we have works such as Ted Wickham's *Church and People in an Industrial City* (1957) which called for a greater attention to the

[3] Appropriately resourced and supported, of course, by expert specialist bodies such as MPA. It's important that those units talk to government and public policy, but they need to be more visible and accessible to lay people at local levels as well as to the House of Bishops.

formation of small cell groups – what might today be called basic Christian communities – in the workplace. Wickham's point was that the Church's mission should make as a priority be addressing the needs of an industrial, urban society which a largely rural church had failed to keep up with. Wickham's vision bore fruit in a generation of innovative industrial mission and workplace chaplaincy, but this area of work took a big hit with the collapse of heavy manufacturing industry in the 1980s, coupled with the beginnings of financial retrenchment within the churches. Whilst this strand of the church's mission to modern society is as much about chaplaincy, new patterns of outreach and sector ministry as it is about lay ministry, it shares similar theological orientations towards the practice of faith in the world.

It is interesting to see how in her critique of *Developing Discipleship* Linda Woodhead turns to many of the concepts (of a spirit-filled community, of the diversity of gifts, of a theology of creation and the redemption of the secular) we have encountered already, when she says: 'The gifts that we are given allow us, *together*, to make up the mystical body of Christ. God [is] present not only in churches: the Spirit is poured out not only on the clergy; and leadership appears in many places.' (Woodhead, 2015, p. 15), my emphasis.

I feel there is a deep dichotomy at the heart of *Developing Discipleship*. On the one hand, its diagnosis of the problem - the poverty of thinking about the laity beyond the gathered church model – is insightful and incisive.

> 'Our understanding of service becomes restricted to the life of the Church. A full theology of discipleship … embraces the world and the kingdom of God in the whole of creation as the horizon and the sphere of Christian service and mission. There are many kinds of

> callings for Christians: the majority are concerned with living out the Christian faith through daily life and work, in the family and the wider community.' (§ 38)

On the other hand, the suggested measures, such as those in 'Ten marks of a diocese committed to developing disciples' are premised on the assumption that existing structures and mind-sets can solve these problems when, singularly, for many generations they have failed to deliver a satisfactory answer to the still unanswered question, 'whatever happened to the laity? Maybe the solutions need to be bolder and more radical. No-one pours new wine into old wineskins.

6. Contemporary Voices, New Challenges

'We need to draw on the deep wisdom of the past but also to apply ourselves afresh to an authentic and Anglican understanding of discipleship for the 21st century.' ((General Synod of the Church of England, 2015)§ 30)

Are we driven, then, yet again, to reinvent a theology of the laity? Well, I hope that we can learn from the wisdom of the past, whilst drawing on measured reflection on the present. It's possible that many of the concerns within the literature of the 1960s still speak to us today. In particular, a sense of the declining status of the churches and of growing secularisation – in terms of the marginalisation of Christianity within public life and culture, as well as a decline in numerical attendance and affiliation (Bruce, 2010). It's undeniable that these trends have continued in the half-century since, such that many people – lay and ordained – will recognise Kathleen Bliss' diagnosis of churchgoing habits feeling ever more alienated from 'mainstream'

culture. This is exacerbated now by a much steeper decline in numerical attendance and membership, coupled with a rising age profile within traditional denominations (YouGov, 2011).

The marginalisation of the Church is sharpened by the rise of so-called 'New Atheism' which questions the very presence of religion in public life, frequently informed by a particular kind of scientific rationalism which regards faith as nonsensical, deluded and dangerous (Hitchens, 2007) (Beattie, 2007).

But alongside these secularising trends, where I think our C21st situation departs from that of the mid- to late C20th, and which gives a twist in the tale, is of course the unexpected and unprecedented re-emergence of religion onto the global political scene. Britain, indeed the whole of Europe, is hugely more culturally and religiously diverse in 2015 than in 1965. This is largely due to patterns of migration from former colonies such as the British Commonwealth and Eastern Europe. Religious faith is often more of a living reality for such communities – particularly in the ways it shapes their political allegiances and their sense of cultural identity. Globally, of course, the rise of radical Islam, especially in the Middle East, East Asia and Africa, and of Hindu nationalism in India, represent examples of the ways in which, far from receding to the margins of our political consciousness, religion has now erupted with unprecedented force.

But 'faith' itself, even within a Christian context, cannot easily be mapped back onto the old churchgoing patterns even of the 1960s. Whilst people still record high levels of belief in some

kind of supernatural or divine being, whilst they may pray regularly, much of the rest of their religious lives are far more heterodox (believing in lots of very diverse things) than orthodox: so belief in angels, or reincarnation, will accompany interest in traditional forms of spirituality such as making pilgrimages and retreats (ComRes, 2012). Surveys talk about a generation of people under 45 in the West as being 'spiritual but not religious' (Fuller, 2001) – they are not joiners of any organizations, and especially not traditional parish churches or congregations (Woodhead, 2014).

So things are changing. Religion is back, but not in terms of a revival of old forms, or a return to Christendom. The majority of people - including many in politics, public services and the media - are, as we might say 'functionally secular', and the gulf between them and the diverse minority of the population who would identify as people of faith is growing wider all the time (Taylor, 2007).

There is still widespread hesitancy about discussing religion within public life, due in part to a lack of basic understanding. And yet no-one can deny that religion is a tangible force, both for good *and* evil – and yet our terms of reference for philosophies of schooling, freedom of speech, civil law, international politics are premised on a largely non-religious world-view. This is the complex situation in which the laity has to find its way in the world today. Elsewhere, I've referred to this as a 'post-secular' condition: we are caught between the 'rock' of religious resurgence and the 'hard place' of resistance to religion as credible discourse or reasonable lifestyle (Graham, 2013).

However fractured and fragmented the public domain may be, the re-emergence of religion as a force in public life requires the voices of faith to consider how best to communicate the basis for their convictions. As I put it in 2013:

> No longer is [the Church] speaking into a common frame of reference, in which [its] theological and moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears. The post-secular describes a public square that is both more sensitive to and suspicious of religious discourse. Indeed, in a context where people's familiarity with any kind of organized religion is ever more tenuous, it places greater onus than ever on the importance of significant communication across the post-secular divide. (Graham, 2013, p. xx)

This is the paradoxical situation in which the churches find themselves today. There have been some achievements: there are a number of good projects working to link faith and the workplace, such as David Clark's work in Birmingham (Clark, 2014a, 2014b). Plus, over the past 20 years or so we have indeed seen the emergence of many excellent programmes designed to introduce people to the basics of Christian belief: Alpha, Emmaus, Exploring Faith Matters (formerly Education for Ministry), Pilgrim, and so on. *Developing Discipleship* is clearly influenced by such initiatives in its talk of *catechesis*, or basic instruction in the faith. There is a great need for that basic religious literacy in the Church. But let's not forget that the lion's share of resources for theological education still goes to those training for ordination (Woodhead, 2015).

And even what is on offer doesn’t seem to be getting through. There are signs that the resistance and collusion identified by John Hull thirty years ago still bedevils laity development. A survey at the beginning of this century by a team of theological educators identified a number of self-imposed impediments to the implementation of programmes of laity development in the churches:

- Perceived non-relevance (to everyday life)
- Alienation from church
- Resistance to learning
- Lack of time
- Affective rather than intellectual approach to faith
- Fear of having certainties undermined (Elias, 2006)

Another report on the attitudes of of evangelical Christians (November 2013; n=1744) suggests that whilst there is an emphasis on Christian basics (cf. Alpha?), churches still put a premium on volunteering for church duties first, and support for putting faith into practice beyond the congregation, second.

- **67%** (2/3) agreed that local church helped them with Christian basics
- **48%** (1/2) felt encouraged to use talents and gifts for local church
- **38%** (1/3) felt supported in working out their faith in relation to public life (increasingly important amongst Evangelicals)
- **26%** (1/4) felt equipped to witness and share faith with others (perennially important for Evangelicals) (Evangelical Alliance, 2014)

So the church is still a long way from being a learning community, where the emphasis is on service and vocation to the world, and where the task of theology is understood as facilitating that faithful, world-affirming witness. But as some of those key voices we heard earlier insist, we do need a theology that helps people make sense of the world around them, to exercise discernment in relation to life's dilemmas, and to be able to communicate and reason eff-ectively. That entails not so much a theology *of* the laity as a new kind of theology *for* the laity. This is a theology which helps to build up two key qualities which I'm calling spiritual intelligence and practical wisdom.

A Theology for the laity: Spiritual intelligence and Practical Wisdom

The first term I get from the Dutch theologian of the laity, Hendrik Kraemer. He distinguishes as I have done, between theological training for lay people that is simply about religious and biblical knowledge, and a formation in the Christian faith that equips ordinary people for an active vocation in the world.

I think Kraemer intends spiritual intelligence to mean the kind of discernment: that ability to relate Christian tradition to contemporary dilemmas, and from there to steer a course through life. We've encountered this already. Mark Gibbs spoke, if you remember, of exercising ministry in a climate of 'belief and scepticism', 'ambiguity and compromise'. But it also means the

cultivation, through prayer, study, collective worship and mutual support, of habits that will enable people of faith not just to have the right kind of knowledge but more crucially perhaps, the right kinds of personal qualities: of resilience; compassion; courage; and vision. It's about forming us as people. But as Kraemer reminds us, whilst spiritual intelligence is drawn from listening to the world and 'bringing to light its real needs and perplexities' (Kraemer, 1958, p. 186), it is also directed to its transformation. It is not knowledge for its own sake, but as having the capacity to direct 'the witness and service of the Church' (p. 186).

Witness and service – again, enduring watchwords from the early days of the ecumenical movement. Luke's Gospel speaks of Jesus of Nazareth as 'a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and the people' (Luke 24.19, NIV). And that combination of belief and action, of knowledge (and theology) with a job of work to do, that's at the heart of my second phrase, of theology as 'practical wisdom' (Graham, 2000).

This is a theology that works from the ground up, by starting from life's problems and questions – be they intellectual, ethical, existential or whatever - and uses the resources of faith to build a practical response. Its aim is to build faithful lives and communities, to clarify and articulate the values and norms around which Christians can chart their journeys of faith (Graham, 2000). How do these beliefs, these propositions help us live? How do the words of Scripture and tradition become flesh in the embodied presence of the Church acting in the world? We need a theology for the laity that will respond to life's dilemmas with relevance and

authenticity, which is rooted in the wisdom of generations that went before us; but is tested, always, in its ability to form us as God's people in God's world.

And it's that relationship between God, 'talk about God' and the Church in the world that I want to return to finally. In much of the discussion of a theology of/ about the laity, you'll find people saying that we can't do that without a theology of the church. Well, certainly, I've been arguing that the vision of the whole people of God is fundamental for a theology of the church. But I've been arguing too that a theology of the laity actually starts with a theology of the world. The task of the Church is not to gather together a community of like minds, but to offer the world the good news of redemption, that it is the subject of God's unconditional love and grace. Whilst helping to build up the life of our local worshipping communities as they meet is important, as the report *All are Called* insists, the true layperson is one 'whose centre is outside the Church, in the world' (General Synod Board of Education, 1985, p. 39). Lay ministry is not to the gathered remnant, then, but one exercised in solidarity with a broken world:

> 'It is the task of searching for, holding to, living, struggling and dying in, the *creative centre of the culture* ... to which we belong; ... It is found at those critical points in society where God's creativity and redemptive acts are contending with forces of meaninglessness, dispersion, disorder and despair ... To be and to persist, to bear "salt" and "light" at these points, in the day-to-day fabric of our human lives, *is* the common Christian calling, the lay vocation.' (Dyson, 1985, p. 16)

References

Beattie, T., 2007. *The New Atheists: the Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion.* London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Bliss, K., 1963. *We the People.* London: SCM Press.

Bruce, S., 2010. *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Church of England Ministry Division/Mission and Public Affairs Division, 2011. Discipleship in Occupation and Economic Life. Online, available at: https://www.churchofengland.org/education/adult-education-lay-discipleship-and-shared-ministry/resources-for-discipleship.aspx [accessed 2 February 2015]

Clark, David B. (ed.), 2014a. *Breaking the Mould of Christendom: Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity*. 2nd Edition. Leicester: Upfront Publishing.

Clark, David B., 2014b. *The Kingdom at Work Project: a communal approach to mission in the workplace*. Peterborough: Fast-Print.

ComRes, 2012. *British Religion in Numbers.* [Online] Available at: http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2012/after-general-synod-religion-and-health/ [Accessed 24 November 2012].

Congar, Y., 1955. *Lay People in the Church.* Eng trans ed. Westminster, Md: Newman.

Dyson, A. O., 1985. Clericalism, Church and Laity. In: General Synod Board of Education, ed. *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity.* London: CIO Publishing, pp. 13-17.

Elias, J., 2006. Models of Theological Education for the Laity. *Journal of Adult Theological Education,* 3(2), pp. 179-193.

Evangelical Alliance, 2014. *Time for Discipleship?* [Online] Available at: http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/snapshot/time-for-discipleship.cfm [29 Jan 2015]

Fuller, R., 2001. *Spiritual but not Religious.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

General Synod Board of Education, 1985. *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity.* London: Church House Publishing.

General Synod of the Church of England, 2015. *Developing Discipleship (GS1977),* London: The Archbishops' Council .

Gibbs, M., 1970. *In the Structures of the World.* [Online] Available at: www.vesper.org [Accessed 19 January 2015].

Gibbs, M., 1981. *The Development of a Strong and Committed Laity.* [Online] Available at: www.vesper.org [Accessed 19 January 2015].

Gibbs, M. and Morton, T. Ralph, 1964. *God's Frozen People: a book for and about ordinary Christians.* 2nd American Edn. ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Graham, E., 2000. Practical Theology as Transforming Practice. in: J.W. Woodward & S. Pattison, eds. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 104-117.

Graham, E., 2013. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age.* London: SCM Press.

Hitchens, C., 2007. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.* New York: Warner Twelve.

Höbel, T., 2002. *Laity and Participation: a Theology of Being the Church.* University of Durham : PhD thesis.

Hull, J. M., 1985. *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?.* London: SCM Press.

Kraemer, H., 1958. *A Theology of the Laity.* Vancouver: Regent College Publishing.

Lakeland, P., 2004. *The Liberation of the Laity: in search of an accountable Church.* New York: Continuum.

Lovegrove, D. W., ed. 2002. *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism.* London: Routledge.

Miller, Donald W., 2006. *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Neill, Stephen and Weber, Hans-Ruedi, 1963. *The Layman in Christian History.* London: SCM Press.

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012. *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's,* Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Phan, P., 2002. *Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church.* [Online] Available at: http://www.mcauley.acu.edu.au/theology/Issue2/PeterPhan.htm [Accessed 13 June 2007].

Phillips, P., 2014. The Universal Call to Holiness: Engaging with the Secular. *New Blackfriars,* 95(1059), pp. 579-592.

Taylor, C., 2007. *A Secular Age.* Cambridge, MA: Belknapp Press/Harvard University Press.

Vatican II, 1965 [1981]. *Apostolicam Actuositatem (Decree on the Aposolate of Lay People).* In: A. Flannery, ed., 1981.*Vatican II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents.* Leominster: Fowler Wright, pp. 766-798.

Vatican II, 1965 [1981]. *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*. In: A. Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents.* Leominster: Fowler Wright, p. 903–1014.

Vatican II, 1964 [1981]. *Lumen Gentium*. In: A. Flannery, ed. *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents.* Leominster: Fowler Wright, pp. 350-440.

Vos, N. Pryfogle. D., and George, M., 2009. *Faith in the World: Mark Gibbs and the Vesper Society, Being God's Lively People.* San Francisco: Vesper Society.

Weber, H.-R., 1997. *On Being Christian in the World: Reflections on the Ecumenical Discussion about the Laity.* [Online]Available at: http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-lay-formation/on-being-christian-in-the-world [Accessed 30 January 2015].

Wickham, E.R., 1957. *Church and People in an Industrial City*. London: Lutterworth.

Woodhead, L., 2014. What People really believe about God, Religion and Authority. *Modern Believing* , 55(1), pp. 49-58.

Woodhead, L., 2015. The challenges that the new C of E reports duck. *Church Times*, 23 January, pp. 14-15.

YouGov, 2011. *British Religion in Numbers.* [Online] Available at: http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2011/yougovcambridge-on-religion/] [Accessed 24 November 2012].