

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LAITY?

Abstract

The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is significant in many respects, not least in providing an opportunity to revisit Luther's emphasis on the role of the laity. Yet such a positive and theologically robust understanding of vocation as secular and worldly as well as ecclesial has informed understandings of lay ministry sporadically, as they have often been submerged by clericalism and institutional inertia. By revisiting the hey-day of modern theologies of the laity from the mid-twentieth century, and in dialogue with a recent Church of England report, this article will suggest some ways in which contemporary theological reflection on lay ministry as the vanguard of the *missio Dei* and the Church in the world might be promoted. A focus on a learning church, education for discernment and a worldly, missional ecclesiology will hold the Church to its essential vision of an empowered laity.

Keywords:

Ecclesiology; Laity; Missio Dei; *Setting God's People Free*; Vatican II; Theological education;

Discipleship

Reformation 500: Celebration and Amnesia

Amidst the celebrations to mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, there is one aspect of that movement that must not be overlooked: the role of the laity. Lutheran teaching has always placed a special emphasis on the personal, quotidian vocation of every baptised Christian, whether that is based on the centrality of the sacrament of baptism or Biblical injunctions such as those in 1 Peter 2 ('you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood ... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession').¹ Alternatively, Luther's understanding of human life as structured within three orders of relationship (*politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*) establishes a variety of realms, albeit under divine governance, in which human beings are commanded to order their affairs. By implication, it means that the domains of government, state, household and economy, as well as Church, must be regarded proper spheres of human flourishing and vocation.

Whilst enduring Lutheran and ecumenical institutions for the support and advancement of lay people such as the biennial *Kirchentag* (founded in 1949) continue, anyone wishing to pursue research into a contemporary of the laity will struggle to find many resources. It is twenty years since the World Council of Churches held a major consultation on the subject.² Many churches would support the principle of the discipleship of the whole people of God, of the importance of following God from Monday to Saturday as well as on Sunday, of drawing no distinction between lay ministry within the Church and the secular vocation of baptised Christians in the world; and whilst many programmes of laity development exist, both denominationally and cross-denominationally, they struggle to articulate any systematic understanding of the relationship

¹ 1 Peter 2:5; 1 Peter 2:9 (New International Version)

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-lay-formation/on-being-christian-in-the-world/index>

between lay and ordained ministries, and the balance between the laity's contribution to the worshipping life of the church and their wider vocation within the secular world. Many denominations conflate lay discipleship with forms of accredited lay ministry within the church, or of invoking 'the voice of laity [to] be heard in support of its clergy' by expecting them to 'step up and take control of the administration side of the Church, freeing clergy up to get on with their core business of worship'.³ Little is done, however, either to educate or support ordinary Christians in the many responsibilities they exercise every day in the world beyond the institutional Church.

Is the sum total of our thinking about the laity merely as a 'reserve army', deployed to compensate for lack of ordained ministers; or are there signs of well-articulated theologies of laity which emphasise the distinctive and complementary potential of lay leadership in worship? Is lay ministry confined to the gathered church or is it also released to be exercised within dispersed church – workplace, wider community, family life? What has happened to Luther's vision of the priesthood of all believers, or his theology that values the worldly vocation of the laity? Rather than a sustainable and fully-fledged theology of the laity, we might characterise the situation as more of a sporadic conversation that has never, as one recent report puts it, been 'fully absorbed into the lifeblood and culture of our Church'.⁴

Hence the title of my article: what about the laity? Whatever *happened* to the laity? Is it possible to conceive 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 members of the Body of Christ? Why,

³ Te Awe Awe-Bevan and Davis, 'Lay Leadership core theme at Anglican Maori General Synod', <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/08/new-zealand-lay-leadership-core-theme-at-anglican-maori-general-synod.aspx>.

⁴ General Synod of the Church of England, *Developing Discipleship* (GS1977) (London: Archbishops' Council, 2015), § 37.

despite an ecumenical legacy of innovative, expansive debate towards a theology of the laity, has there been such amnesia towards its advancement?

In this article, I will examine work that has emerged from a recent initiative within the Church of England to consider the roots and future prospects for such a renewed theology of the laity. In January 2015, the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England announced a series of far-reaching reviews of its structures of finance, governance and training, known as 'Reform and Renewal'. The programme included a pledge to 'a debate on encouraging the discipleship of the whole people of God as the foundation for re-imagining ministry for the 21st century'.⁵ Two working parties were duly established on the role of the laity: one on Accredited Lay Ministry such as Readers and Pioneer evangelists; the second on 'Lay Leadership'.⁶ The guiding question of the latter group was nothing less than how the laity could be released and empowered to exercise a range of ministries primarily within the wider world beyond the Church.

Whilst its theology awaits further augmentation and development, its major emphases – on the Church as existing in a symbiotic relationship of gathered and scattered existence, of clergy and laity working together in a common baptism, and lay discipleship rooted in the mission of the Church – attempt to honour the genius of earlier generations whilst realistically responding to changing circumstances. This article is in part, then, an invitation to rekindle a wider discussion that is ecumenical, cross-disciplinary and missional in its scope.

5 General Synod of the Church of England, *Developing Discipleship* (London: The Archbishops' Council, 2014), p. 1.

6 <https://www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform/setting-gods-people-free.aspx>

Whatever happened to the laity? Historical perspectives

Hans-Ruedi Weber has argued that 'Laity is not a Biblical word', a claim that alerts us from the start that we must not assume that words we use today have always meant the same thing.⁷ So whilst the Greek term *laos* (λαος), meaning 'the people of God' (*laos tou theou*) is certainly a Biblical concept, it may not map neatly onto our structures of bishops, presbyters, clergy, deacons, lay readers. There is an evident historical evolution whereby the early Church was 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.

Weber argues that it may be more fruitful to trace our word 'laity' back to the Greek word *laikos*, which is already in use by the end of the first century (1 Clement, 96CE). It carries the sense of those not clergy or religious; as those who might be considered 'profane' as those who stood beyond the sacred space of the temple. This begins to point us towards a distinction between those who are in the world rather than being concerned with the liturgical ministries of word and sacrament. In spite of this, however, the concept of the people of God is always primary; and even when the Church community is institutionalised into a hierarchical structure, the 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. In foregrounding the notion of 'the people of God' we are also reminded 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

⁷ H.R. Weber, *On Being Christian in the World: Reflections on the Ecumenical Discussion about the Laity* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-lay-formation/on-being-christian-in-the-world>.

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 indeed shares in the priesthood of all believers.

That process of differentiation, however, is always tempered by the understanding that the people of God does indeed embrace everyone, regardless of status or office. Furthermore, it does not simply denote '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.⁸The 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.

Clearly, 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.⁹ 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.

⁸ H. Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1958), p. 155.

⁹ S. Neill and H.R.Weber, *The Layman in Christian History* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

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.¹⁰

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 United States. However, the most important seeds may have been those sown towards the end of the nineteenth century, decisively shaping our contemporary understanding of a largely professional clergy ranked against/ above/alongside a secular class of laity.

Firstly, mirroring the decline of Christendom in the West, with a concomitant widening of the gulf between Church and world, there emerged a more conscious understanding of the laity as at the vanguard (or what came to be termed the 'frontline') of a more dispersed Body of Christ at work in a thoroughly and independently secular realm. Secondly, there was a more developed understanding

¹⁰ D.W. Lovegrove, ed., *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism* (London: Routledge, 2002).

of the extent to which in such a changing and complex context, laity have by and large been inadequately released from ecclesial duties or resourced theologically to fulfil that calling.

The end of the nineteenth century 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. Coupled with that, the spread of universal 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, church members demanded more from their parish or congregation and with it a more satisfactory theology of the laity. There is a strong connection with the emergence of the modern ecumenical movement after 1945 and a more intentional attention to the role of the laity. This was due, in part, to the fact that many 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.

The growth in overseas missions from Western churches to the global South after 1910 Edinburgh Conference also fuelled a tremendous eruption of energy amongst lay people, volunteering as doctors, teachers, engineers, and so on. Whilst most of the mainstream denominations in Europe and North America commissioned missionaries of their own, this period was also notable for the emergence of movements such as the Student Volunteer Missionary Movement (later the Student

Christian Movement), the YMCA and YWCA and Frontier Trust. These were lay-led and ecumenical in foundation, often independent of denominational structures.¹¹ As former European colonies became independent, many of these former missionaries returned home with a global perspective of the world Church beyond Christendom, and often a sharp sense of the encounter between Christianity and other faiths. This translated into an interest in how Western culture, which was already showing signs of secularisation, was itself now in need of evangelisation:

... 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.¹²

The nascent awareness of the laity as a distinctive, missional and particular part of the life of the Church thus begins to emerge from the middle of the twentieth century. It was conditioned by the emergence of secular modernity: a separation of religion into a separate compartment, a more educated and globally-aware laity, and the beginnings of a drift 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,

11 H. Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1958), pp. 25-36.

12 K. Bliss, *We the People* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 52.

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.

In response, new threads begin to be woven into a specific theology of the laity, emphasising an incarnational, world-affirming mission to ‘a world come of age’ that requires serious intellectual engagement with and incarnational solidarity alongside the currents of human history. New critical approaches to ecclesiology emerge, similarly, absorbing sociological and historical understandings of the 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 transcend and rejuvenate traditional patterns of thinking and organizing.

The heyday: 1945-1985

These energies came to fruition between the 1940s and 1960s, only really falling away in the 1980s which is why we might regard this period as offering some of the most significant thinking and representing, potentially, a strong heritage for any contemporary development.

We the People (1963)

Kathleen Bliss’ professional formation was typical of that emergent caste of lay people who had come to prominence in the early ecumenical movement of the mid-twentieth century: experience of international mission (in Bliss’ case, in the Church of South India); work with J.H. Oldham in the industrial fellowships of the Christian Frontier Council; and education work with the YMCA and

Church of England Board of Education.¹³ Her short paperback, *We the People*, brings together much of what was being said in Protestant circles at this time. It bears the traces of earlier themes already highlighted: 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; a conviction 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’.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Whilst Bliss is confident that these dual aspects must be held together, she is adamant that one cannot overshadow or substitute the other. Thus, whilst advocating wider engagement with the worlds of work, education and community, she is receptive to lay leadership in matters of worship and preaching; as elders, or teachers, or participating in church governance.¹⁶ 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”’.¹⁷ She is uncompromising in complaining that much of what passes for training in local churches confuses or conflates competence in fulfilling Church duties with enabling the laity to carry out their worldly

13 (1908-1989) <http://austausche.ioe.ac.uk/Kathleen%20Bliss.htm>

14 K. Bliss, *We the People* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 10.

15 Bliss, *We the People*, p. 29.

16 Bliss, *We the People*, SCM Press, 1963, p. 22-28.

17 *We the People*, p. 25.

vocation to the best of their ability. She says, 'For what the laity lack is not the know-how of successful magazine distribution but *basic equipment in understanding what it means to be a Christian.*'¹⁸ It is a moot point, now as then, however, as to whether the laity are offered such 'basic equipment' with which to make sense of their faith; and I will return to the question later of whether existing schemes of Christian education are fit for purpose.

Nevertheless, 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:

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 [sic] needs it to guide and sustain him in the world.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bliss, *We the People*, p. 26, my emphasis.

¹⁹ *We the People*, p. 30.

Bliss communicates a picture of the laity caught between the irresistible force of a secularising society and the immovable object of a beleaguered church, and yet lacking the resources and understanding to ‘make sense’ of, let alone mediate between, the growing gulf.

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,²⁰ 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.’²¹

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. 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.

20 Church of Scotland minister and deputy leader of Iona Community.

21 N. Vos, D. Pryfogle and M. George, *Faith in the World: Mark Gibbs and the Vesper Society, Being God’s Lively People* (San Francisco: Vesper Society, 2009), p. 23.

[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.²²

Together Morton and Gibbs founded the Audenshaw Foundation, which published series after series of papers on questions of economics, politics and social responsibility.²³ 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.'²⁴ 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.

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).²⁵

Vatican II 1962-65

22 M. Gibbs and T. Ralph Morton, *God's Frozen People: a book for and about ordinary Christians*, 2nd American Edn (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 9.

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

24 N. Vos, D. Pryfogle and M. George, *Faith in the World: Mark Gibbs and the Vesper Society, Being God's Lively People* (San Francisco: Vesper Society, 2009), p. 123.

25 M. Gibbs, *The Development of a Strong and Committed Laity*, www.vesper.org 1981, p. 2.

Whilst the second Vatican Council was essentially a conclave of (male) Bishops and cardinals, its legacy for subsequent thinking about the role of the laity was unparalleled. This begins to alert us to the congruence between theologies of the laity and ecclesiological thinking. As those preparing the conciliar documents considered issues such as the nature of the church, the challenges of contemporary culture and the need to depart from a hierarchical model of church order – and orders of ministry – towards a more participatory and collegial vision, so too a fresh and well-articulated understanding of the laity began to emerge.²⁶

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’.²⁷ It is the latter vision that the Council is attempting to realise, however, by burying traditional understandings of a division between the powerful clergy and a passive laity, in favour of an understanding of there being one baptism, one common calling, one Church, which is united in mission to the modern world.

For example, Yves Congar’s 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’²⁸

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

27 P. Lakeland, ‘*Lumen Gentium*: the Unfinished Business’, *New Blackfriars* 90 (2009), pp. 146-162, at p. 149.

28 Phillips, ‘The Universal Call to Holiness’, p. 591; Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church* Eng. Trans. ed. (Westminster, Md: Newman, 1955).

We can see these threads woven throughout the Council's pronouncements. So, for example, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965) discussing the lay apostolate, locates the role of the laity decisively within the life of secular society. Furthermore, this will require a particular kind of adult formation and training in the faith. Echoing Congar and Mark Gibbs, it prioritises forms of theological understanding that enable the laity to navigate their way through life's complexities, calling for discernment and confidence in bringing faith to bear on everyday issues and 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.²⁹

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; 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'³⁰: this represents an unprecedented spirit of openness (*aggiornamento*) towards the

29 Vatican II, 1965 [1981]. *Apostolicam Actuositatem (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People)*. In: A. Flannery, ed., 1981. *Vatican II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents*. Leominster: Fowler Wright, pp. 766-798, at 794.

30 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, at 1001.

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 re-orientation, and one with implications for the doctrine of the Church also. It implies that the laity stands at the vanguard of this response of the Church in and to the world.

Once again, this is suggestive of the practices 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. 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. ³¹

As Peter Phan has argued, the documents of Vatican II can be interpreted 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,

³¹ *Gaudium et Spes* in Flannery, ed, *Vatican Council II*, p. 905.

and church understood primary in the institutional model'.³² But for Phan, Vatican II simply turns that sequence of priorities on its head, so that 'reign of God, mission, proclamation, and church'³³ become the proper priorities of ministry and mission: in other words, what matters is God (in Jesus Christ), world, church in that order. The retrieval of a theology of mission -- and indeed, the Church -- is, as I shall argue later, a crucial foundation of a world-centred theology of the laity.

... and where did it all go wrong?

Finally, a report produced by the Church of England in the mid-1980s reminds us of the problems of articulating a mature and sustainable theology of the laity. Twenty years after these earlier groundbreaking 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 thinking in this area has fallen victim to amnesia. The laity 'have been theologically out of sight and out of mind',³⁴ for the following reasons. 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 leading to reluctance to change. Furthermore, in the face of secularization and loss of status, clergy are reluctant to share authority and expertise. Nevertheless, it attempts to gather up the threads by using the familiar language of the universality of Christian vocation. 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

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

33 Phan, *Proclamation of the Reign of God*, 2002.

34 General Synod Board of Education, *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), p. 13.

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.

Some voices around this time suggested, however, that the marginalisation of the laity was not exclusively due to clericalism. John Hull's work suggested that lay people might also collude with their own passivity, choosing not to challenge the disjunction between Sunday church and the life of Monday to Saturday. Hull argued that factors specific to Western modernity inhibited adult Christian learning and may actually cause lay people to adopt, consciously or otherwise, a passive and disenfranchised role.³⁵

Hull speculates that lay Christians may actually prefer church-going not to challenge or make demands, since it serves as convenient respite from the everyday pressures in the rest of their lives. 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 has the effect of infantilising the faithful. It is assumed that Christian learning is for children, that it is something they will outgrow; or else it is compartmentalised into that 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.'³⁶ 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.'³⁷ Rather than equipping the laity for a worldly vocation, then, the Church has become a separate enclave or refuge from the world:

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

36 Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?*, p. 8.

37 *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* p. 10.

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.³⁸

Some research has suggested that this kind of resistance and collusion still bedevils laity development. A survey at the beginning of the twenty-first century – thirty years after Hull’s diagnosis -- 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.³⁹

Another report on the attitudes of 1744 self-identified evangelical Christians in England in November 2013 suggests that whilst there is an emphasis on Christian basics (such as the successful *Alpha* programme), churches still put a premium on volunteering for church duties first, and support for learning that puts 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.⁴⁰

38 Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* p. 7.

39 J. Elias, ‘Models of Theological Education for the Laity’, *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 3.2 (2006), pp. 179-193.

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

Such research would suggest that the Church still falls short of being a true learning community, in which the emphasis is on service and vocation to the world, and where the task of theological reflection and formation is understood as facilitating a faithful, world-affirming witness.

Contemporary Debates: Renewal, Reform and the Language of Leadership

I return now to an evaluation of how well the recent report from the Church of England might address some of these challenges and begin to articulate a renewed theology of the laity. As *Developing Discipleship*, one of the early documents associated with the ‘Renewal and Reform’ process admitted,

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 ... 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 time through their discipleship ... [M]ost seriously, 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.⁴¹

It was in response to this challenge that the Lay Leadership Task Group was commissioned in March 2016, reporting to the Church’s General Synod in February 2017. *Setting God’s People Free* sets out to ‘empower, liberate and disciple’ the 98% of the Church who are not ordained, and takes

⁴¹ Church of England General Synod, *Developing Discipleship* (London: Church House, 2014), pp. 7-8.

as its inspiration a much earlier report, not on lay ministry but on mission and evangelism.⁴² This may reflect the strong representation from Evangelical wings of the Church of England on the Group, but significantly locates the stakes of contemporary lay discipleship not on the viability of Church structures but the very evangelisation of the nation:

Liberating the laity to be confident and faithful disciples is integral to effective mission and to building a healthy church. Without proper theological undergirding, however, it will be impossible to form and nurture Christians who are capable of proclaiming and living out the gospel in their daily lives, engaging confidently and faithfully with the complex challenges of today, and becoming an effective presence in their communities.⁴³(p. 13)

A series of vignettes and case-studies within the Report address the opportunities and impediments confronting the laity in the Church. This comment from a teacher serves to expose the limitations of a theology of the laity that prioritises the needs of the institution without giving due recognition to wider contexts of lay discipleship: ‘I teach Sunday School 45 minutes each week and they haul me up in front of the church to pray for me. I teach in a school 45 hours a week and the Church has never prayed for me.’⁴⁴ As a result, the Task Group is calling for “a robust and theologically grounded narrative and vision of the role of the laity and lay leadership”, in order to attend to this important relationship between life in the gathered and scattered, or dispersed, church. It identifies two core priorities:

42 Church of England Commission on Evangelism, *Towards the Conversion of England*, 1946; see Archbishops’ Council Lay Leadership Task Group, *Setting God’s People Free* (London: Church House, 2016), p. 3.

43 Archbishops’ Council Lay Leadership Task Group, *Setting God’s People Free* (London: Church House, 2016), p. 13.

44 Archbishops’ Council, *Setting God’s People Free* (London: Church of England, 2016), p. 5.

First. Until, together, we find a way to form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never evangelise the nation ...

Second. Until, together, we recover a healthy relationship between lay people and clergy, based on baptismal mutuality and a proper complementarity of roles and gifts, we will never form flourishing Christian communities that can evangelise the nation.⁴⁵

These convictions are drawn from a conviction that laity and clergy are partners, not rivals, in the church's ministry. They are mindful not only of impediments to lay participation exerted by church hierarchies, but ways in which – as John Hull's work signalled – ordained and lay members may be caught in relationships of co-dependency and collusion.

Three key theological concepts -- baptism, the nature of the Church and the primacy of mission – underpin its theology. A common baptism marks the Church as one people in Christ, incorporates it as His Body and commissions it to share in his mission to the world. Beyond that, whilst there may be further differentiations of ministry, whether that is ordination or some kind of licensed or accredited lay ministry, there is a fundamental unity to the life and work of the Church.

The report also echoes Kathleen Bliss' differentiation between 'gathered' and 'scattered' (or dispersed) in order to highlight the various contexts in which lay leadership is exercised: those in elected or appointed offices within the gathered church; those in informal roles; those serving the community via church-based or related initiatives; and those (noted as the one million estimated

⁴⁵ *Setting God's People Free*, pp. 3-4.

practising Anglicans) who work out their Christian vocation in the workplace, voluntary service, family life or local neighbourhoods.

Threads of earlier theologies of the laity are also evident, such as the significance of theological formation that is designed to promote qualities of discernment and character rather than cognitive knowledge alone.

How are Christians who are not in specialist ecclesial roles within the Church (such as Readers) equipped to integrate their regular patterns of Sunday (and weekday) worship, personal devotion, Bible reading and other practices of faith with the demands of family life, finances, personal relationships, politics, media and consumerism? Does the Church really equip lay people to connect the insights of Scripture and tradition with the fast-moving realities of commerce and popular culture, the challenges of caring for those around them, or of responding to the questions of non-Christian friends, relatives or colleagues?⁴⁶

As the report concludes, this will entail an entire change of attitude:

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 in the individual. 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. The opportunity before us is therefore nothing less than the

⁴⁶ *Setting God's People Free*, p. 15.

liberation of both clergy and laity into the fullness of following Christ for the sake of the church and the world.⁴⁷

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.’⁴⁸

Are we driven, then, yet again, to reinvent a theology of the laity? It is possible that the churches can learn from the wisdom of the past, whilst drawing on measured reflection on the present. Many of the concerns within the literature of the 1960s still speak powerfully today. In particular, a sense of the declining status of the churches and of growing secularisation in the West: the marginalisation of Christianity within public life and culture, as well as a decline in numerical attendance and affiliation [CITATION Bru10 \l 2057]. It is 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 alienate⁴⁹d from ‘mainstream’ culture.

Such a growing gulf between institutional Church and secular world is, arguably, deeper and wider at the beginning of the twenty-first century than in the nineteen-sixties. Numerical attendance and membership is declining ever more steeply, coupled with a rising age profile within traditional

⁴⁷ *Setting God’s People Free*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Developing Discipleship*, 2015, p.6.

⁴⁹

denominations.⁵⁰ 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. 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.⁵¹ Surveys talk about a generation of people under 45 in the West as being 'spiritual but not religious'⁵² – they are not joiners of any organizations, and especially not traditional parish churches or congregations [CITATION Woo141 \l 2057].

Such a novel and unprecedented 'post-secular' cultural climate⁵³ reinforces a need for forms of laity development and adult education which will help 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 effectively. That entails not so much a theology *of* the laity as a new kind of theology *for* the laity; and in the spirit of Martin Luther, this article will conclude, not with ninety-five, but three, theses towards this end.

What would Luther do? Three theses for an empowered laity

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

51 N. Spencer and H. Weldin, *Post-religious Britain? The faith of the faithless* (London: Theos, 2012).

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

53 E. Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (London: SCM, 2013).

The focus of the laos is in the world and not the Church

The emphasis of *Setting God's People Free* on the mission of the Church resonates with the turn in recent ecumenical theology to the idea of the *missio Dei*. Discerning and participating in the *missio Dei* moves the focus beyond personal conversion or the fortunes of the institutional Church, towards mission understood theologically as “God’s turning to the world”.⁵⁴ It locates the task of Christian discipleship as participation in God’s redemptive activity in the world.

... the main vocation of God’s people is not to build and to support church structures (though some of these may certainly be necessary). It is to find a new style of humanity – in explicitly Christian terms to be the Body of Christ, the intelligent and committed embodiment of Christian love and service – *in the secular structures in which God has placed or will place them.*⁵⁵

Interestingly, this has been expressed more recently by people like Neil Hudson and Tracy Cotterell in the terminology of ‘whole-life discipleship’⁵⁶ – once more, a refusal to restrict active lay discipleship to the confines of the institutional Church. This requires a change of perspective in which the focus of the church’s life *together* is actually that of equipping its members for the life *apart*. The challenge of a missional, world-affirming church that is committed to forming Christians as disciples who are outward-looking and seek to engage with secular culture is one of creating a

54 Schmitz, *Die Weltzuwendung Gottes: Thesen zu einer Theologie der Mission*, cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 2nd Edition (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 376.

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

56 T. Cotterell and N. Hudson, *Leading a Whole-Life Disciplemaking Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2012).

positive interdependence between these two dimensions. Church life can be a catalyst for change; but it can equally be a drain for energies. Hudson and Cotterell encourage their readers to shift their strategies away from discipleship programmes to rejuvenating and reorienting church cultures – adding additional activities or extra responsibilities is counter-productive. There needs to be a bigger vision of mission in which people are formed to ‘flourish in mission, [and] live well with Christ in this rapidly-changing culture’.⁵⁷

An Empowered Laity needs a Learning Church

One popular definition of the *missio Dei* is that of ‘find[ing] out what God is doing and join[ing] in’ (Rooms and Keifert, 2014, p. 10). This is arguably a dynamic of simultaneous action *and* reflection; a three-fold movement of listening and attending to the movement of the Spirit at work in the world, of responding to that divine presence by being called out to lives of service and action; and of witnessing to others as to the source of this calling, in the prior activity and grace of God.⁵⁸ The question then becomes what priorities a truly ‘missional’ church or congregation⁵⁹ (Rooms and Keifert, 2014) might need to place on the role and deployment of all its members, lay and ordained.

It follows that there is an urgent need to equip and nurture lay Christians to be the church in the world, which begins from trying to make sense of the questions the world is asking, and acknowledging the gulf between Church and the rest of our everyday lives, including the assumptions of most those in the world *beyond* the Church. Whilst there is a place for the gathered

⁵⁷ Cotterell and Hudson, *Leading a Whole-Life Disciplemaking Church*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ See E. Graham, *Apologetics without Apology: speaking of God in a world troubled by religion* (Eugene, Or: Cascade, 2017), pp. 124-150.

⁵⁹ N. Rooms and P. Kiefert, *Forming a Missional Church: Creating deep cultural change in congregations* (Cambridge: Grove, 2014).

church and its activities of worship, theology, spirituality, community, hospitality, it is as a vehicle for and witness to the wider activity of God (and the people of God) within the world.

For Yves Congar, one of the main architects of the theology of Vatican II, this vision of the Church in the world and of the Church as the people of God implied two main things. It meant a vision of a Church informed and shaped by a ‘prophetic awareness of what it means to be human’ rather than the maintenance of ‘clerical authority’ – that spirit of reaching out beyond the boundaries of the doctrinal and creedal institution into a new vision of human solidarity. But in addition, it called for a spirituality of discernment and transformation on the part of clergy and laity alike.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

If discipleship is also about learning skills of reflection on/in action, what does it mean to become a ‘learning church’? If the *missio Dei* leads to these tasks of attending, acting and bearing witness, then this will require the Church not just to treat the laity as reserves of labour or

⁶⁰ Phillips, ‘The Universal Call to Holiness’, 2014, p. 591.

⁶¹ Church of England Ministry Division/Mission and Public Affairs Division, *Discipleship in Occupation and Economic Life*, 2011.[Online], available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/education/adult-education-lay-discipleship-and-shared-ministry/resources-for-discipleship.aspx> [accessed 2 February 2015], p. 7.

activism, but to build them up as sources of wisdom - an informed and theologically-literate laity. As *Setting God's People Free* argued, nor is this a matter of cognitive learning or acquiring qualifications, but more in line with Hendrik Kraemer's idea of 'spiritual intelligence'.⁶² Kraemer distinguishes 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.

Kraemer intends spiritual intelligence to mean the very kind of discernment also suggested by Yves Congar: an ability to relate Christian tradition to contemporary dilemmas, and from thence to steer a course through life. Similarly, Mark Gibbs speaks of exercising ministry in a climate of 'belief and scepticism', 'ambiguity and compromise'. However, it also means the cultivation, through prayer, study, collective worship and mutual support, of habits that will enable people of faith not simply to acquire the right kind of knowledge but more crucially perhaps, the right kinds of personal qualities or virtues: of resilience; compassion, courage and vision. As Kraemer reminds us, however, whilst spiritual intelligence is drawn from listening to the world and 'bringing to light its real needs and perplexities', 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'.⁶³

This is a theology that works inductively, therefore. It begins with life's problems and questions – be they intellectual, ethical, or existential -- 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. The question is, however, how do these beliefs, these propositions help people to live faithfully? How do the words of Scripture and

⁶² Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity*, p. 187.

⁶³ Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity*, 1958, p. 186.

tradition become flesh in the embodied presence of the Church acting in the world? This calls for 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 Christians as God's people in God's world.

Any renewal of lay leadership will probably therefore necessitate new patterns of authority and leadership, and with that new models of training – lay and ordained ministries, in church and world. This is actually a (practical) theological task, in terms of discerning how far secular or non-Christian insights, drawn from management, business or social sciences, are appropriate. Do such models reflect and uphold Kingdom values or do they pursue ends that are detrimental to authentic Christian leadership and discipleship? Clearly, the practices of prayer, worship, private devotion – such as forms of structured and guided reading of Scripture and other literature – study groups, formal and informal pastoral care are already vital sources of nurture and support for many lay Christians. Even so, theological educators will need to find ways in which the liturgical life of local worshipping communities can more effectively nurture, challenge and support the activities of lay leadership and the discipleship of the whole church.

A Theology of the Laity needs a robust Ecclesiology

A final question for further theological exploration is the question of the nature and shape of the Church itself. I have been lamenting the difficulties of upholding any model of lay leadership that does not become absorbed into one of supplementing clerical roles or maintaining ecclesial structures. This, in turn, reflects a tension between Church as hierarchical institution, and 'spirit-

filled community’ or pilgrim people of God. At the same time as Kathleen Bliss was speaking of the two dimensions of the ‘gathered’ and the ‘scattered’ church, the documents of Vatican II, were similarly characterising the Church both as *magisterium*, with established, divinely-constituted orders of ministry and authority, and as a spirit-filled, pilgrim people characterised by ‘a universal call to holiness’.⁶⁴

Interestingly, although Hudson and Cotterell’s work emerges from that of the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity – and thus a very different part of the Church from mid-twentieth century progressive Roman Catholicism – the emphasis on lay discipleship as one of living out the gospel in all aspects of their everyday lives and of cultivating the capability to relate faith to all of life is remarkably similar. But the language of ‘the frontline’ – the world not the church – to which I referred earlier, establishes the secular domain as the place to which the laity are called to work out their faith, in practice, as a performative act of grace.

So we cannot think about the future of the laity ‘on the frontline’ in the world as the scattered or dispersed Body, without asking how that relates to the gathered Body in the shape of the institutional church – even if that ceases to resemble the familiar structures of parish and congregation that we know today. For a start, how far does the transmission of faith and the support of the laity in their dispersed or ‘scattered’ activity require the continuity of long-standing structures and offices? But equally, how radically might those existing structures need to change in order for new areas of growth and innovation to emerge?

⁶⁴ Phillips, ‘The Universal Call to Holiness’, 2014; T. Höbel, *Laity and Participation: a Theology of Being the Church* (University of Durham : PhD thesis, 2002), pp. 59-64.

Conclusion: what will become of the laity?

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 local communities of Word and Sacrament is an important facet of the role of all baptised Christians, as the report *All are Called* insists, the true layperson is one 'whose centre is outside the Church, in the world'.⁶⁵ Lay ministry is not to be directed exclusively at the gathered remnant, then, but something 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.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *All are Called*, 1985, p. 39.

⁶⁶ A.O. Dyson, '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, at 16.