

SETTING GOD'S PEOPLE FREE: CULTURE CHANGE FOR A CONFIDENT CHURCH

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The Report

Setting God's People Free (SGPF) is a report, published in 2017 calling for a change of culture in the Church of England. Originating from a task group set up to examine how to encourage 'lay leadership beyond the walls of the church' this challenge is posed as:

Will we determine to empower, liberate and disciple the 98% of the Church of England who are not ordained and therefore set them free for fruitful, faithful mission and ministry, influence, leadership and, most importantly, vibrant relationship with Jesus in all of life? And will we do so not only in church-based ministry on a Sunday but in work and school, in gym and shop, in field and factory, Monday to Saturday? (SGPF, p.5)

The vision behind Setting God's People Free then is not about replacing clergy roles with lay ministry roles. Nor is it about providing opportunities for more involvement in church activities – important though these are. The challenge is widening our imagination on how we **all are called** to serve God's mission in God's world. The report upholds that a culture of forming disciples is the foundation for such a vision. What the SGPF report identified, distinct from previous reports on the laity or discipleship, is that our 'church cultures' are not forming and sustaining people to live out being Christian in our wider culture. Across traditions, though observed in different ways, we have:

A culture that over-emphasises the distinction between sacred and secular and therefore fails to communicate the all-encompassing scope of the whole-life good news and to pursue the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to make whole-life maturing disciples. We will not raise up cadres of godly leaders unless we create communities of whole-life disciples. (SGPF p.6)

At its most basic level culture can be defined as 'the way things are done round here'. The fundamental assertion then behind Setting God's People Free is that the way things are done in most church of England churches doesn't help people to live out their faith in everyday life, and this must change.



Culture Change in the Church: Adaptation and Discernment

Forming communities that enable people to form and express a confident faith is a challenge the Church is always engaged in. What SGPF encourages is a collective focus for dioceses, deaneries and worshipping communities to examine and evolve 'the way we do things' now! We are very careful to stress that this is not about asking people to do 'more things' but to 'do things differently' – to adapt.

This notion of adaptive change, based on the work of Heifetz and Grashow from Harvard Business School, has been useful in approaching work with dioceses and churches. Succinctly, the main distinction in leading technical and adaptive change lies in that:

Technical problems (though complex) can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through an organisation's current structures, procedures and ways of doing things. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise.

Put bluntly, the challenge of disciple-making in a secular age is not a technical problem. If it were, we would be able to clearly identify the problem and apply a solution. If it were a technical problem, then getting people to do the right course, fixing a home group structure, or widening a ministry team would sort it. These things might help, but only as part of a wider approach to adapt how everyone in church plays their part in identifying and developing strategies to help evolve a 'disciple-making' culture.

Adaptive change then focuses on how leaders engage with all the stakeholders in their organisation. As I will outline in a moment, this means developing core skills as a leader that don't rely on personal authority or expertise. It is not however the application of a management model.

Change in the church begins with acknowledging that God is the primary agent of change in culture, because it's the work of the Spirit that transforms people – including us. Leading change in the church always begins with how Christian leaders help others to discern where God is active in our midst. This said, a process to hold this discernment and change helps. In our work with dioceses and parishes across the country we are evolving a model of change around three facets of culture – behaviours, structures and leadership.

Leading Change in the Church: Changing Behaviours, Adapting Structures and Widening Leadership

Culture is embodied in behaviour. It stands to reason then that culture change necessitates changing behaviour.

The way we do things round here is also framed by our structures – the formal and informal rules and processes that shape our interactions.

Leaders, people with influence as well as authority, are also crucial agents in setting a culture. If we want to change culture, we need to change the way we lead.

With the help of LICC we offered churches seven shifts for a big difference. Small changes to behaviours, structures and the practice of leading, which if done frequently help to shift our culture to one that affirms everyday faith. These are:

1. Being curious.
2. Visiting in context.
3. Praying for Monday to Saturday life.
4. Talking about This Time Tomorrow.
5. Changing what's noticed.
6. Commissioning people.
7. Preaching differently.

BEHAVIOUR: FINDING YOUR SKIMMED MILK

Ultimately the behaviours we are seeking are those that conform to being transformed by Christ. However, our starting point is to first foster the types of behaviour that help to affirm that being Christian is bigger than merely coming to church. More pointedly perhaps, it is to challenge any church to question if their culture is one that supports a vision of a Monday to Saturday faith – where our collective behaviours affirm how to live out our callings in the everyday.

If behaviour change is going to stick, people need to want to change and be able to do it. Finding this is often a process of trial and error. We talk about this as 'finding your skimmed milk', as researchers in America found that switching to drinking skimmed milk from whole milk had the biggest single effect for recovery after a heart attack.



A starting point for finding your skimmed milk is to make small changes to the things you already do. For instance, one senior leader helping to generate a culture of curiosity decided on a habit of responding differently to how people introduce themselves. For instance, when someone introduces themselves as 'I'm the churchwarden at St Boltholes' she doesn't follow up with questions about the church, but rather asks what interests they might have away from church.

A deeper change in behaviour is to choose to meet with people in different places; their workplace or community venue. Both of these behaviours signal the importance of how we value other people's time. We might also find something interesting about where the person we are meeting spends most of their time.

STRUCTURES: FEELING SAFE TO FAIL

If changing behaviours lies at the core of culture change then for these to take effect, we need to be aware of how our structures also shape our behaviours. Our culture, the way *things are done round here!* is shaped by formal and informal practices and processes. This is no different in a church to any other organisation.

In fact, some of the things we do – symbolic acts – can have a profound effect on people. In a church, what we pray for and highlight in our services are 'string frameworks' for what is held to be important. Similarly, what we feature in meetings, write in notice sheets and show on notice boards can all be considered as part of this 'architecture'.

In looking at how to address structural change Berger and Johnston suggest that small steps, which are 'safe-to-fail', are more useful than grand changes. What they mean by this is creating a culture in which people can 'try out a wide variety of possible approaches, with an eye on learning as much as they can while nudging the system in a desired direction.'

Changing the focus of prayers to focus on Monday to Saturday experiences, and introducing a This Time Tomorrow slot are a useful example of such change.

If you're not familiar with TTT, this simply provides a regular opportunity for a congregation member to talk in a service about what they do in the week. It uses three standard questions:

- What will you be doing this time tomorrow?
- What challenges and opportunities do you face?
- How can we pray for you?

We are seeing dozens of examples of how this small change ripples out to other changes. One church found this led to someone setting up a new mid-week prayer group to support callings in everyday life. In another, a homegroup set up a WhatsApp prayer group on a Wednesday lunchtime. The vicar set up the TTT slot, but the other two ideas came from congregation members.

LEADERSHIP: SHRINK THE CHANGE

In adaptive change repositioning leaders not as experts but as facilitators of change is key. This will involve the way in which the direction of change we are seeking is given clear reference in our preaching. It is also given weight by who else is seen as a visible leader.

In the book *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath talk about the real-life difficulties of instigating change. They argue that if people feel the task is too big, they freeze. To counter this they suggest that leaders have a key task in communication, which is to shrink the change. As well as making clear links to faith in everyday life, a challenge in preaching then is to provide a constant story around why we are doing this, and what difference we hope it will make. Help focus people on the next step in the bigger picture. Holding the story, as the Heaths describe it, helps people to move towards a big vision by giving a clear sense of the next step.

A key in this idea is that this is not just the task of 'the leader', but of 'the leadership' in a church. Therefore, it is as important for people to hear how this change is helping from each other as it is from the overall leader. This task for dispersed leading means giving people the opportunity to affirm their stake in this story.

Here the role of commissioning people into the roles they have outside the church is helpful. This doesn't only signal value of the ways that God calls people, it also provides opportunity for people to be part of leading this culture change. Stakeholders become leaders. New leaders can then model new behaviours, and support new structures...



FOR REFLECTION

1. What's your honest assessment of whether your church culture supports people to live out faith Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday?
2. What behaviours can you start modelling to help begin to make this change?
3. Where might you begin to adapt your structures and practices, and who needs to be involved in identifying this?