

# Looking for Maturity in the Emerging Church\*

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## Introduction

The title of this chapter is arguably the most ambiguous in the entire book, for almost every word in it is contested in one way or another. The lecture in which it originated was, of course, initiated by Fresh Expressions – but not every Fresh Expression would qualify as an emerging church, and not every emerging church would regard itself as a Fresh Expression in the sense of being a form of church that is identified with the Fresh Expressions initiative of the Anglican and Methodist churches in England. Far from being a distinctively English phenomenon, the emerging church is a worldwide movement that can be found in various guises in many different countries. In sociological terms it is perhaps best described as a metanetwork, or network of networks, and certainly has no overarching organizational structure to compare with Fresh Expressions. Even the terminology is not fixed, with some preferring the word ‘emergent’ rather than ‘emerging’, though I have never quite grasped what the difference is supposed to be.<sup>1</sup> Trying to define the emerging church is therefore like wrestling with the proverbial jelly. At the same time, it is worth attempting some sort of definition of it at the outset here, if only to clarify my own use of the term.

## Emerging

As of now, we can clearly identify at least three ways in which the terminology is being used.<sup>2</sup> In some circles, the language of ‘emerging church’ amounts to nothing more than an exercise in advertising: a way of repackaging an existing product in order to present it to a new generation. This repackaging manifests itself in various forms, some of which can appear to offer a flexible space for spiritual exploration, but in the end of the day it is about adapting an old product to new markets. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with doing this, of course, but by attaching the label of ‘emerging church’ to what is in effect just a variant form of traditional church the usefulness of the terminology is diminished.

Alongside this, though by no means identical with it, the desire to create ‘emerging church’ can also begin from dissatisfaction with existing churches, with a mixture of sad and angry people who

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1 For some Americans who are experimenting with new forms of church within a generally fundamentalist-evangelical context, ‘emergent’ seems to be preferred as a way of distancing themselves from the use of the term ‘emerging Christianity’ (not ‘church’) by more radical scholars such as Marcus Borg, to describe ‘a “neotraditional” form of Christianity ... a “seeing again” of the most central elements of the Christian tradition.’ Cf Borg’s, *Jesus: uncovering the life, teachings, and relevance of a religious revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2006), 298-299. Others who are operating in a more global – and theologically diverse – context often wish to distance themselves from ‘emergent’ because it has become a commercial brand in the USA, and use of the term ‘emerging’ is a way of establishing a distinctive identity.

2 For a more extensive discussion of this taxonomy, see John Drane, ‘Editorial’ in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6/1 (2006), 3-11. On the emerging church more generally, Eddie Gibbs & Ryan K Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2005) offer a good overview, though with a tendency to impose a homogeneity on the emerging church that goes beyond the evidence. The somewhat intemperate critique by D A Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2005) fails to recognize any diversity within the movement and as a consequence includes some who would not be part of the emerging church by any definition adopted here (e.g. British Baptist Steve Chalke), while limiting the discussion to only one very narrow strand, predominantly that represented by the writings of Brian McLaren. Given the grass-roots nature of the movement, it is a fundamental mistake to try and understand it only by reference to those who publish books on the theme, as if they were necessarily representative of the bigger picture, which is why the research of Gibbs and Bolger is a more reliable guide, as it is based on ethnographic study of specific local manifestations of emerging church.

are predominantly alienated from what Alan Jamieson and Steve Taylor have called the EPC end of the theological spectrum ('Evangelical – Pentecostal – Charismatic').<sup>3</sup> This is the phenomenon that first came to prominence through Dave Tomlinson's book *The Post-Evangelical* and it largely consists of individuals who abandon their previous allegiances in favour of their own independent movements.<sup>4</sup> Their mantra tends to be, 'we'll show them how to do it right', and the creation of emerging churches on this model then inevitably becomes a way of holding two fingers up to the establishment. As a rough rule of thumb it is not too inaccurate to say that they tend to be more prevalent in north America than in England, or for that matter Australia and New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these two, however, there is another form of emerging church that consists of creative groups who in different ways are still embedded within the tradition and heritage of historic Christianity, and who might well have been both encouraged and empowered from within the tradition to ask radical questions about the nature of church in the context of our ever-changing culture.<sup>6</sup>

Because of these multiple ways in which the term 'emerging church' is used, whenever I meet a particular example of it, I invariably ask a further question: emerging from what? For there is a world of difference between those groups that are emerging out of a fundamentalist-evangelical sub-culture that tends to set the agenda, and those that are emerging from a three-way, missiologically intentional conversation between Gospel, Tradition, and Culture. The one tends to define itself by reference to what it is not, whereas the other is engaged in a more open-ended exploration of key questions, such as:

- How might we follow Jesus faithfully in today's post-modern culture?
- What might new wineskins for new circumstances look like?
- How can Gospel and Culture be brought into a creative dialogue that will affirm and challenge both of those conversation partners?

In reflecting on the 'emerging church', it is this third type that I have in mind here.

## **Maturity**

'Emerging church' is not the only contested term in our title, however. There is a corresponding ambiguity in the notion of 'looking for maturity'. For it all depends on who is doing the looking, where they are looking from, and what they consider maturity to be. Maturity is not some self-defining objective reality, but is a culturally determined category, and it is arguable that the understandings of maturity which we tend to take for granted belong to a cultural matrix that no longer exists. Personal maturity is often assumed to consist of the sort of intellectual and emotional development that has traditionally been associated with adulthood, with the

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3 Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (London: SPCK 2002); Alan Jamieson, Jenny McIntosh & Adrienne Thompson, *Church Leavers* (London: SPCK 2006); Steve Taylor, *A New Way of Being Church* (University of Otago, PhD thesis 2005).

4 Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (London: Triangle 1995). It must be significant that this was republished in an expanded form as part of Zondervan's *emergent ys* series, aimed at the emerging church market: Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, revised North American edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2003). For a more personal account of much the same story, see Gordon Lynch, *Losing my Religion?* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2003).

5 The reference only to Western nations is intentional: the rise of the emerging church as defined here is largely a Western phenomenon – depending on one's perspective, either a product of or a response to the pervasive influence of post-modernity. It could plausibly be argued that indigenous churches such as those that are mushrooming in Africa ought also to be included in the 'emerging' spectrum, for they are indeed non-traditional in relation to the inherited patterns. But to include them here would be a diversion from the main purpose of this volume.

6 In some respects, this description could also apply to what is generally called 'altworship' ('alternative worship'), though that is not automatically the same thing as emerging church. There is a need for further discussion to tease out the similarities and differences between these two movements within the mainline church, but this is not the place for it.

accompanying assumption that life consists of a series of linear and progressive changes that automatically lead from the naïvete of childhood to the wisdom of old age.<sup>7</sup> Undergirding that is the expectation that change itself is always measured, gradual, and controllable. In today's world, this is no longer the case, not even in terms of human development. We live in an age when adolescence can begin at 8 or 9 years old and for some people can last well into their thirties, while it is not at all uncommon to find people in their fifties and sixties reverting to teenage behaviour in response to the fragmentation of their intimate relationships. If by 'maturity' we mean the wisdom that will allow us both to survive and to thrive, then it is becoming increasingly obvious that the tried and tested wisdom of the past is often incapable of dealing with the challenges that we now all face. As a consequence, in the wider culture the nature of maturity (along with many other things) is being reconfigured.

Historically, maturity was always defined in relation to the past, as one generation grew into and inherited both the positions and the wisdom of those who preceded them. Today, organizations and individuals that look exclusively to the past are struggling, while those that thrive are the ones that look to the future. In the process, many of the categories that once seemed fixed are now being reimagined. The reason for this is that the nature of change itself has changed, and instead of being gradual and predictable it is now random, rapid, and unpredictable. Within this frame of reference, the nature of maturity is being redefined as a quality that will enable us to live in the future rather than the past. The old maturity was characterized by nostalgia; the new maturity is marked by innovation. The old maturity valued tradition and rationality; the new maturity centres around imagination and creativity. The old maturity found a home in religious performance; the new maturity prioritizes values and spirituality. This might sound like a novel and challenging concept, though the idea that spiritual maturity should have an eschatological, future-oriented core is deeply grounded in the Biblical tradition.<sup>8</sup> It does, however, raise a serious question for the church. We know how to do history – especially in England – but are we now going to take the risk of becoming partners in building the future?

Running in parallel with this theological perspective, there is an expanding body of sociological research suggesting that the key to the future is in the hands of what is being called 'the creative class'.<sup>9</sup> This is how Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson describe those whom they identify as the cultural creatives:

'At times the journey feels awkward or perilous: you're asking questions that everyone wishes would go away; you don't know how to put into words what you're searching for; you're wondering just how big an idiot you really are for leaving what felt sure and safe and comfortable' – though all this is tempered by 'the freshness and exhilaration of setting out for new territory'.<sup>10</sup>

Anyone who has ever connected with the emerging church will identify with those sentiments, and it is not coincidental that the emerging church has an abundance of people who exactly match the profile of the creative class.<sup>11</sup> If maturity is about developing our innate human potential – or in

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7 Typified in the sort of developmental patterns implied by Erik H Erikson's 'eight ages of man', cf his *Childhood and Society* 2nd ed (New York: Norton 1950).

8 Cf Ray S Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity 2001), 102-112, where he asks 'which century is normative for our theology?', and goes on to argue that in any authentically Biblical theology there must always be an 'eschatological preference' looking to the future. Cf also Anderson's essay, 'The Praxis of the Spirit as Liberation for Ministry', in *The Soul of Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1997).

9 See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books 2002); *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge 2004).

10 Paul H Ray & Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives* (New York: Three Rivers Press 2000), 44.

11 The precise terminology may be less important than the reality that it represents: that growing numbers of people are moving beyond the McDonaldized systems we have inherited, and are seeking new ways to reinvent institutions of

theological terms, fulfilling the promise of the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27) – then we will find it among those groups who look forward rather than backward, and who themselves actually become an embodiment of the future by taking responsibility for their role in shaping that future for all the world’s peoples. At the lecture on which this chapter is based, my mention of the creative class proved to be rather contentious, with some attendees claiming that this merely confirmed their perception that the emerging church is an exclusively white, middle-class movement. But creativity is the one capacity that depends on neither background nor education, but is an intrinsic quality of being human. Creative imagination is not limited by class or social circumstance – which is exactly what we would expect, given that the first page of the Bible identifies the whole of humankind (‘male and female’, Genesis 1:27) as co-creators with God, by virtue of being made in the divine image. Nor, significantly, is creativity age-related, which helps to explain the presence of older people even in emerging congregations with a predominance of twenty- and thirty-somethings. As I compare what we know of the church in previous generations with what we see today, I cannot help but conclude that over the years we have lost touch with creative people – of all sorts – in a way that is now threatening the future of the institution itself. From the Hebrew prophets to Martin Luther King Jr – and with many others since – every significant renewal movement of the past has been initiated by courageous and creative individuals who have been prepared to step outside the recognized constraints of tradition and convention in the effort to create a new future, their understanding of maturity exemplified by the home-spun wisdom that was made famous by Robert Kennedy: ‘Some people see things as they are, and ask why? I see things as they might be, and ask why not?’<sup>12</sup>

## **Marks of Maturity**

With all this in mind, then, what might some of the marks of emerging maturity consist of?

### ***Concern for an organic way of being***

The emerging church is firmly rooted in the realities of a globalized culture, and recognizes that it is no longer possible for any one group to live within its own isolated cultural bubble. In the 1998 movie, *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey plays a character who is an archetype of traditional Western institutions of all sorts – living in an imaginary world of their own creation, but believing that it is the real world.<sup>13</sup> This is how emerging church people tend to see the fragmented forms of Christianity handed on from the past. At a time when institutions are generally distrusted just because they are institutions, it is inevitable that the inherited forms of church should be subjected to the same scrutiny. Many wonder why they should be anything other than ‘Christian’? What point is there in adopting labels such as Anglican, or Methodist, Roman or Pentecostal, Baptist or Reformed, evangelical or liberal, when a reading of church history seems to show that such sectarian fragmentation, if not actually part of the problem, has certainly not turned out to be much of a solution. A majority of emerging church people – especially those who come into faith from no previous church background – have no interest in such matters, and simply take it for granted that there is a fundamental unity among Christians of all sorts, regardless of how they might express it. If they think about it at all, they might speculate that the traditional divisions, with their

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all sorts, from the bottom up. For more on this, see my forthcoming book *After McDonaldization* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> For a theologically well-grounded account of this mindset in relation to the emerging church and the Bible, see Ray S Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity 2006).

<sup>13</sup> *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter Weir, written by Andrew Niccol, starring Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank, Laura Linney as Meryl, Ed Harris as Christof, Noah Emmerich as Marlon. Released by Paramount Pictures, 1998. For more reflection on this film, see John Drane, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000), 154-173.

diverse styles of worship and governance, have more to do with the preferences of different personality types than with any significant issues of belief.

When emerging churches reflect on the wider Christian tradition, they tend to identify with models that pre-date the Reformation, whether in medieval monasticism or the missional spirituality of the Celtic saints. Of course, the further back we place our focus, the less certain we can be of what we are focusing on, particularly in the case of Celtic Christianity. From a purist historical perspective, I can sympathize with those scholars who argue that what we know about such ancient times is too insubstantial to bear the weighty reconstructions of Christian spirituality that are now being placed upon it.<sup>14</sup> But from a missiological point of view, these arguments entirely miss the point. For when a culture finds that the metanarrative that it once took for granted is either untrue, or merely unserviceable in changed circumstances, it is natural that we look back into our own story in the effort to identify new paradigms that might inspire us for the future. Faced with the diminishing prospects of the people of God, the Hebrew prophets repeatedly looked back to more ancient times and reinterpreted an old story (usually the exodus narrative) for new circumstances. The historical knowledge of the exodus available to Isaiah or Jeremiah must have been just as flimsy as our certain knowledge of the Celtic era, but that never stopped them reshaping the story. In a different way, and on the basis of more certain historical knowledge, the New Testament evangelists did something similar with the stories of Jesus. When the emerging church looks to ancient times for patterns of organic spirituality and then remodels them in the light of new circumstances, this is just the latest phase in a very old story.

Accompanying this (and often inspired by the past) is a concern for social justice and environmental care, as well as an intentional effort to ensure that worship is relationally interactive, and that teaching and learning incorporates multi-sensory ways of knowing – not as a way of supplanting the importance of written texts and rational reflection, but as a pathway of obedience inspired by Biblical exhortations to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:29-30). There is a challenge here for both emerging and traditional church. The challenge for those emerging churches which see little value in the wider tradition is to understand that, whether they like it or not, being Christian by any definition does place you within a story stretching back over two millennia. Recognizing that, and being able to live within the reality of it, is surely going to be a key marker of spiritual maturity. For those at the traditional end of the ecclesiastical trajectory, though, there is a different challenge, to recognize that an organic way of being is unlikely to be a structural thing, or even a theological thing. It is, on the contrary, a human thing, as people who follow Jesus find themselves journeying with others who also follow Jesus – and recognizing that the church's wholeness, within itself and with the rest of humanity and the cosmos, is guaranteed only insofar as it walks alongside the Founder.

### ***Recognizing the Spiritual in all things***

Being faithful has often been understood as separation from the prevailing culture. The catholic tradition has emphasized the exclusivity of sacred space, while evangelicals have tended to focus on an internalized personal ethical space. When projected into the philosophical space of modernity, both these outlooks led to a privatization of faith, with a consequent division between the sacred and the secular and the implication that we are unlikely to encounter God in the events of everyday life. This has arguably been one of the most damaging effects of recent Western thinking on the mission of the church, especially in the pietist version that required Christians to withdraw from engagement with the wider culture in order to be fully Christian.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Cf Donald E Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press 2000); Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: making myths and chasing dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1999).

15 And which continues to be advocated by Stanley Hauerwas, a scholar who (surprisingly) is highly regarded in certain sections of the emerging church. For a classic statement of this position, see Stanley Hauerwas & William H Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon 1989).

It was Karl Barth who in 1932 first proposed that mission should be understood as an activity of God, rather than as a church programme, though it was the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century before the term *missio Dei* ('mission of God') was coined as a way of describing this reality.<sup>16</sup> Today, it would be hard to imagine the emerging church without some reference to this concept. The notion that this is indeed God's world, that God is at work in it, and that being the church involves a call to discern where God is at work and to be intentionally aligned with that, is fundamental to much emerging thinking. It is this concept that has enabled emerging congregations to be established in locations that previous generations would have considered off-limits for the church and its worship – places like night clubs, bars, health clubs, or (worst of all) ground occupied by the proponents of other spiritualities. The recognition that no place can be designated as a no-go area for God has opened up significant spaces for emerging churches to occupy.<sup>17</sup>

Here, then, is a second sign of maturity towards which the emerging church is pointing: the challenge to look beyond ourselves and our own internal affairs, to grasp the bigger picture of what God is doing, and to choose to get alongside God, no matter how strange the territory might seem to be. This is something on which many of us talk a good talk, but struggle to grasp the radical reality to which we are being called. A fair number of emerging groups are inwardly focused, offering a form of spiritual therapy for their own members, rather than opening themselves to the missional activity of God. But then, much of traditional church operates in the same way, with sermons that are little more than personal anecdotes, tuneless songs that are devoid of any meaning beyond the personal angst of those who write and sing them, and an assumption that real church can only happen within the four walls of our buildings. Frustrated clergy find themselves running a spiritual hospice while all the time God is moving the waters in the birthing pool. At a recent diocesan retreat, one priest who was clearly frustrated by his lack of missional appeal asked me, 'How can we get the people to come to the altar?' When I turned the question on its head, by asking 'How can we take the altar to the people?' he was dumbstruck. The notion that the spiritual could possibly be encountered anywhere except in a church building at a certain time of day formed no part of his worldview. The emerging church would never think like that.

#### ***Working towards an inclusive community***

Inclusive is the one adjective that can probably be applied to most manifestations of emerging church. One of England's longest-established emerging churches describes its worldview in the following terms:

We believe that God is already in the world and working in the world. We recognize God's indefinable presence in music, film, arts and other key areas of contemporary culture. We wish to affirm and enjoy the parts of our culture that give a voice to one of the many voices of God and challenge any areas that deafen the call of God and hence constrain human freedom.<sup>18</sup>

This is inclusivity with a vengeance. Unlike most church statements about inclusivity, it makes no mention of sexuality. But neither does it mention the church! Instead, building on the notion of the *missio Dei*, it offers an understanding of inclusivity that embraces and incorporates whatever

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16 David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1991), 389-393.

17 A good example of this would be *The Tribe* of Los Angeles, an emerging church that is recognized as a regular parish within the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches of the USA. Its regular meetings take place in the Subud Center in downtown Los Angeles (Subud is a worldwide spiritual movement with roots in Indonesia), and *The Tribe* has also become a significant spiritual component of the Burning Man Festival, an annual event that takes places in the Nevada Desert, combining Bacchanalian elements with spiritual search. See [www.tribeofla.com](http://www.tribeofla.com) and, on *The Tribe* and Burning Man, James G Gilmore, *Divine Appointments: patterns of engagement between Burning Man and Emerging Churches* (Fuller Seminary Dissertation, 2006) – available at [http://emergingchurch.info/research/jimgilmore/gilmore\\_divine\\_appointments.pdf](http://emergingchurch.info/research/jimgilmore/gilmore_divine_appointments.pdf)

18 <http://www.sanctus1.co.uk/whoweare.php>

God may be doing, wherever that may be taking place. Moreover, it takes for granted that God may be found in what many people would regard as unlikely places. At the same time, it is certainly not uncritical and could never be accused of advocating the sort of uncritical inclusivity in which ‘anything goes’. On the contrary, there is a strong emphasis on the need for discernment and a call to be appropriately challenging those aspects of the culture that undermine the purposes of God. This statement could never be misconstrued as an invitation to syncretism, but at the same time it is all a very long way from the categories in which Richard Niebuhr taught us to think of Christ and Culture.<sup>19</sup> It does, however, have strong Biblical roots in a creation-centred spirituality, and in the teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. Even if it does not always know the answers to its own questions, the emerging church is at this level engaging with some of the key issues of our day by insisting that God is not limited to the religious world, let alone the church world, but may be encountered literally everywhere. It takes as its text Mark 9:40, ‘whoever is not against us is for us’, and is actively engaged in exploring both the extent and the limits of that sort of inclusive embrace.

Discernment, inspired by a vision of the Kingdom, is absolutely central to this outlook. For if our cultural context is the source of the alienation and discontinuity with which people struggle in their everyday lives,<sup>20</sup> it can never be good news merely to affirm the culture without further qualification. Doing that has led numerous congregations in directions that actually undermine their missional calling, as they continually reorganize themselves in line with the latest trendy insights from the business community, and all too easily end up with a religious version of those oppressive McDonaldized systems that are the very antithesis of the Gospel.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, what may need to be challenged today will not be the same as the dehumanizing trends that characterized Western culture fifty or a hundred years ago. If the temptation of syncretism and cultural integration is a challenge for the emerging church, the challenge of addressing the culture as it is, rather than as it once was, is a matter requiring urgent attention in more traditional churches.

This sign of maturity frequently manifests itself as an intentional hospitality, and the sharing of food is a central aspect of worship within many emerging churches. We live in a society full of lonely people, in which we are scared of making the very connections that we know we need. Our inner lives might be collapsing, yet we construct impenetrable legal barriers to protect ourselves from others!<sup>22</sup> But the kind of suspicion that the culture applauds is actually contrary to the Gospel. The emerging church knows that, and challenges it: welcoming the stranger is not just a social need, it is also a Biblical principle, and it is one factor that connects emerging church with a much bigger frame of reference, by drawing on the insights of emergence theory. Originating in geometry and chaos theory, this identifies the phenomenon whereby a complex organization comes into being not as a result of a grand design promoted by a leader, but as a consequence of the collective actions of its relatively humble members.<sup>23</sup> In church terms, this kind of socialised enterprise invariably develops when the people of God are empowered to imagine their own future from below, rather than accepting the cascaded (and truncated) responsibility that is handed down

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19 Richard H Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2001, originally published 1951). For a critical analysis of this approach, see Craig A Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: a post-Christendom perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2006).

20 Cf George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: the Reader* 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 2006).

21 Cf John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).

22 The classic study of our growing individuality and its consequences is Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2000). See also Ethan Watters, *Urban Tribes* (New York: Bloomsbury 2003).

23 For introductory treatments of emergence theory, see John H Holland, *Emergence: From Chaos to Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000); Steven Johnson, *Emergence: the connected lives of ants, brains, cities, and software* (New York: Penguin 2001); Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann & Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* (New York: Random House 2001).

from on high. That sense of empowerment always begins with people's personal stories being taken seriously.

### ***Living in the Story***

In a day when both the power and relevance of abstract reasoning is questioned, story is re-emerging as a form of discourse in which we can speak of ultimate realities without implying any universal claims. Story creates a space within which we can reflect with others on our own personal stories, while understanding the shared cultural story into which we are born.

Theologically, this can become a space in which we allow ourselves to be caught up into the all-embracing narrative of the divine story. In his book *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink suggests that what we need today are 'creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers ... artists, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers'.<sup>24</sup> The emerging church lives happily within this paradigm.

For generations brought up in the traditions of Cartesian rationalism, the preferred model of theological reflection was located in the sort of analytical presentations of Christian faith that can be found in embryonic form in St Paul, and in the highly developed systems of philosophical speculation that came to define the meaning of faith for centuries after that. There were good contextual reasons for this, as our forebears struggled to make sense of Jesus in the conceptual categories of their day. The emerging church is not disinterested in St Paul, though it certainly tends to be much more interested in Jesus – but in Jesus as a person to be followed rather than Jesus as an object of belief to be dissected and analyzed. William Bausch expresses the difference well:

'Propositions are statements on a page; stories are events in a life. Doctrine is the material of texts; story is the stuff of life ... Theology is a secondhand reflection of [the Christ] event; story is the unspeakable event's first voice.'<sup>25</sup>

Starting with the stories of Jesus not only informs emerging understandings of mission, but also of the nature of the church. Whenever we define the church from within our inherited ecclesiologies, we will always get a Christendom-shaped church, because the inherited theological patterns are themselves a manifestation of Constantinianism, and in many cases their structures are all but identical to the governance of the political systems of the age in which they came to birth. This is most obviously the case with those traditions that have taken over the structures of the Roman empire itself.<sup>26</sup> But it is just as true for the inherited ecclesiology of the Free Churches, modelled in its Reformed versions on the governance of 16<sup>th</sup> century Switzerland and Holland, and in its Baptist versions owing more than a little to Cromwellian notions of republicanism.<sup>27</sup> If, as is now widely recognized, the contextualization of the gospel represented by Christendom is no longer an appropriate vehicle for the good news, that must be taken into account in any discussion of what it means for the church to be both emerging and incarnational. Both these terms imply a bottom-up rather than a top-down process, and whenever people and their stories are taken

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24 Daniel H Pink, *A Whole New Mind* (New York: Riverhead Books 2006), 1.

25 William J Bausch, *Storytelling, Imagination and Faith* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications 1984), 28.

26 For more on this, see John Drane, 'From Creeds to Burgers: religious control, spiritual search, and the future of the world', in James R Beckford & John Walliss, *Theorising Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006), 120-131. Also in abridged form in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: the Reader* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 197-202.

27 It has become fashionable in some circles to hold up the Anabaptist tradition as a form of Christianity that is somehow untainted by Christendom. There are certainly connections between some aspects of the emerging church and Anabaptist principles, and there is no doubt that this tradition is offering fresh insights into the nature of Christian community that are being welcomed in many circles. But to imagine that this therefore represents a pristine model of church that comes without any of the baggage of the past requires some rewriting of history. Anabaptists – and the Free Churches more generally – rejected the coercive aspects of Christendom, but still operated on the underlying Constantinian notion of a culture that would be directed and owned by Christians.

seriously as vehicles for the transcendent, then by definition we end up with something very different from the sort of generic church with which we are all familiar. At its best, the emerging church creates space for stories to be heard, shared, and acted upon – but only when it has authentic leaders who are willing to acknowledge their own struggles and weaknesses as well as their strengths.<sup>28</sup>

This is one point at which many emerging churches have some way to go to achieve maturity, for some of them continue to perpetuate patterns that look suspiciously like Christendom, even while they speak the language of the Kingdom. Nowhere is this more obvious than in their leadership structures. For whether by design or historical accident, the vast majority of emerging churches – on any of the definitions offered at the start of this chapter – are bastions of male leadership.<sup>29</sup> It would require further research to tease out the reasons for this, though I suspect it may have something to do with the blog culture within which a majority of discussions about the emerging church take place, and which tends to be dominated by men. They are not all chauvinists, of course, but some of the more prolific bloggers belong to my second type of emerging church (angry ex-fundamentalists), or are funded by conservative organizations, and bring that baggage into the conversation in ways that others (being less familiar with the Bible and church history) find hard to resist or disagree with. On the other hand, the relative paucity of women leaders in the emerging church might also be related to our understanding of the nature of leadership, something that is a cultural problem and not just an emerging church issue. Though great strides have been made in recognizing the need for many voices and stories to be heard, it is still the case that most Western institutions (including churches that ordain women) operate with structures and processes that reflect the preferences of white males, and others who are either unable or unwilling to operate within this culture (whether male or female) find themselves marginalized.

## **Conclusion**

One of the things that can surprise newcomers to the emerging conversation is its fascination with ancient forms of Christian spirituality, whether that be through the adoption of traditional rituals or the creation of new ones that may indeed be newly minted, but which turn out to bear more than a passing resemblance to practices that were embedded in the earliest days of the Christian story. This is a manifestation of a wider trend within the culture of post-modernity. Our dissatisfaction with modernity has created a spiritual vacuum that we are more than ready to fill with ancient nostrums that our grandparents would have dismissed without a second thought. In the effort to make sense of our present predicament, we are quite happy to jump backwards to what we imagine was a simpler time imbued with spiritual wisdom of the sort that rationalism and materialism dismissed too readily. How else can you explain our fascination with the mystical and the numinous, with angels and tarot cards, with holistic healing therapies and guidance from spirits? It is as if we have come to regard anything recent and Cartesian as the source of all our troubles, and therefore anything that is ancient and non-Cartesian will be the solution to them. Robert Webber has aptly called this the ancient-future axis of the emerging church.<sup>30</sup> It also takes our quest for maturity in the emerging church back to an unexpected starting point. In the Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief in a church that is ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic’. Is that just another way of speaking of a church that is organic, that finds the spiritual in everything, while being inclusive and living within the story?

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28 In this respect, Emerging Church has some interesting similarities with base Christian communities.

29 The Tribe of Los Angeles, mentioned earlier, is one of only a handful of emerging churches that I have come across that are led by women (and in that particular case, a woman who does not fit the other stereotype of emerging church people always being in their twenties or thirties).

30 Cf Robert E Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 1999); *Ancient-Future Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2003); *Ancient-Future Time* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004).

These wise words from Gert Ruppell seem to summarize much of what we must now contend with:

‘... I think we are back to what is called ‘square one’. We may timidly admit that we are living in ‘apostolic times’, in times where the cloth is being woven. A risky time in apostolic mission, where we have to tell one another the basis of our hope, join with each other in the expression of the strength of our faith, telling one another the questions we have in order to find together the answers that the world, the people, are expecting from us as disciples of Christ.’<sup>31</sup>

The image of weaving the cloth is a powerful metaphor for today’s church. So much of what we have inherited is like a comfortable sweater that is now unraveling around the edges. We can do one of two things with that sort of sweater: either we patch it up, to try and make it last a bit longer, or we pull at the loose ends to see what happens, with a view to taking the wool, washing it, and knitting it into a garment that will be fit for a new generation. No-one could possibly deny that the unraveling is happening. It is the creative spirits of the emerging church who are acting with missional intentionality to imagine, and then to create, unfamiliar shapes and patterns of faithful discipleship that are both old and new (Matthew 13:52).

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31 Gert Ruppell, *Ecumenical Letter on Evangelism* (Geneva: World Council of Churches December 1995), 6.