

What is the Emerging Church?*

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Ten years ago, the term 'emerging church' would have been unknown. Today it is impossible to go very far – certainly in the church culture of the UK, USA, and Australasia – without encountering both the word and the reality which it describes. The reason is simple: the church in these places is in serious decline. Even Christian researchers are suggesting that by 2040 there will be only a residual Christian presence in Britain, and that institutional structures will have imploded and disappeared long before that.¹ Though church attendance is still reasonably healthy in many parts of the USA, recent research documents the growing popularity of new forms of faith activity, such as home churches, marketplace ministries, and cyberchurch, and the prediction is that even those who follow the teachings of Christ and are committed to regular prayer, Bible reading and spiritual direction will in future be doing so without any formal connection with congregational life.²

Running parallel with this is the popularity of a loosely-defined 'spirituality' over against a more institutionally-based 'religion'.³ It is difficult to make specific connections between the rise in popular spirituality and the decline of the church, but commonsense suggests that if those who are intentionally looking for spiritual meaning in life do not expect to find it in the church, then we have a problem on our hands. Moreover, a much publicised research project carried out by David Hay at the turn of the millennium demonstrated that spiritual experience is apparently not restricted to those with any sort of overt faith commitment, but is widespread within the 'secular' population.⁴ Social scientists offer various explanations of these cultural shifts, but however they are interpreted, Christian leaders face the uncomfortable reality that the inherited patterns of church life no longer have meaning for the majority of Western people. Debates about the legitimacy of change and the form that it might take are increasingly irrelevant, because the church is already changing whether we like it or not. In my lifetime, it has gone from being a vibrant spiritual community at the centre of civic life to being on the margins, from being an all-age community to being largely the preserve of old people, and from being a place of nurture and spiritual growth for children to being a prison from which they escape as soon as they are old enough to make their own choices (even supposing they have had any connection with it in the first place, which itself is an increasingly unlikely circumstance). There are of course numerous local exceptions, but the future of the institution as a whole is clearly in jeopardy, and this awareness has opened up a space for creative contextualization of Christian belief within the new cultural matrix. This

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¹ Peter Brierley (ed), *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 5: The Future of the Church* (London: Christian Research 2005), 12.1-14.

² George Barna, *Revolution* (Ventura CA: Barna Research 2005).

³ For an informed assessment of this trend, see Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), which is the report of an ethnographic study of the spiritual and religious life of Kendal, a small town on the fringe of the English Lake District.

⁴ David Hay & Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Centre for the Study of Human Relations 2000).

is the context in which the ‘emerging church’ has come to birth, and in which it must be understood.⁵

Definitions

What then is the ‘emerging church’? This is difficult to answer with any precision, partly because it is a work in progress, but also because the groups that claim this label are very diverse.

On the one hand, ‘emerging church’ is being used as a shorthand way of describing a genuine concern among leaders of traditional denominations to engage in a meaningful missional way with the changing culture, and as part of that engagement to ask fundamental questions about the nature of the church as well as about an appropriate contextualization of Christian faith that will honour the tradition while also making the Gospel accessible to otherwise unchurched people. This understanding of emerging church is well described by Ben Edson in his account of the missiological thinking behind *Sanctus I*, which also reflects (and, since it pre-dated it by a couple of years, may also have influenced) the thinking behind *Mission-Shaped Church*, a report presented to the Church of England’s General Synod in February 2004. Not only has this initiated a significant ecclesiological discussion, but within less than a year of its publication the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, in partnership with the Methodist Council, established the ‘Fresh Expressions’ project with the express purpose of creating new forms of church that will meet these challenges.⁶ This endeavour is now high on the agenda of every diocese of the Church, and is being closely watched by leaders of other denominations.

There is, however, another image of ‘emerging church’, consisting of Christians who have become angry and disillusioned with their previous experience of church (predominantly at the conservative evangelical, fundamentalist, and sometimes charismatic end of the spectrum), and who have established their own faith communities that – far from being accountable to any larger tradition – are fiercely independent, and often highly critical of those who remain within what they regard as the spiritually bankrupt Establishment.

Both forms of ‘emerging church’ are clearly identified in the articles gathered here. It is tempting to distinguish between them in a territorial way, and it is certainly the case that this second type is more typical of ‘emerging churches’ in North America, while the first is more typical of the English scene (and to a lesser extent of Australia and New Zealand). There is some truth in this rough-and-ready distinction, and it is undoubtedly the case that no other denomination in any country has affirmed the need for new ways of being church with the enthusiasm of the Church of England.⁷ It is

⁵ For more on the missional relevance of the cultural context, see my *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000), and *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual? The Rise of New Spirituality & the Mission of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2005).

⁶ *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing 2004); see also <http://www.freshexpressions.org>.

⁷ The Church of Scotland recognized the importance of the question in its *Church Without Walls* report, which was accepted by its General Assembly in 2001, long before *Mission-Shaped Church* had even been commissioned. But compared with the Anglican Fresh Expressions initiative, virtually nothing of a practical nature has come out of it. A similar comment would apply to the mainline

therefore almost inevitable that emerging churches in other places will tend to adopt an independent stance. Free-market Christianity has always been more prominent in America than in Europe, but that is not the whole picture. The lack of (even occasionally opposition to) any active missional engagement with the culture has forced many of their most talented younger leaders out of the mainline denominations, feeling that they had no alternative but to establish new forms of church in partnership with like-minded people. The article by Scott Bader-Saye highlights the diverse realities which are being described as emerging church, and his taxonomy offers a useful way of distinguishing between the various attitudes that are represented. Those who are already familiar with the subject will also know that even the term itself is contested, with the word 'emergent' being preferred by some, though there appears to be little differentiation of meaning between emergent and emerging.

Background

With so much evident diversity, only a brave – or foolish – person would offer any explanation of this situation. Nevertheless, though my own initial thoughts will in due course be superseded (and certainly will not be the whole story), it is worth the effort, if only to try and connect this movement with the existing knowledge of most readers of this journal, for some of whom the very notion of 'emerging church' may be completely new.

It seems to me that the emerging church is the heir to two quite discrete streams within recent church history. One of them is the ecumenical movement, which has played a bigger part in this development than is generally appreciated. The ecumenical instruments of the mid-20th century were modelled on the older patterns of Christendom, but from the start they were forced to operate in a global context, and became aware of the growth of majority-world churches long before most Western Christians had heard of such a thing. By the late 1980s, non-Western forms of Christianity were becoming increasingly influential in international gatherings of bodies such as the World Council of Churches and the World Association of Reformed Churches (not to mention the worldwide Anglican communion), and though there was a suspicion – occasionally, even fear – of such contextualized theologies and ecclesiologies, there was also a gradual acceptance that this was the trend of the future, as traditional Western churches declined in their own heartlands. Coinciding with this was a growing realization of the inadequacies of the liberal theological mindset which had hitherto driven the ecumenical agenda. This not only created a desire to get to grips with the nature of the emerging post-modern culture, but also engendered a new appreciation of the importance of the evangelistic task.⁸ Though there was little or no collaboration between them, two individuals were particularly significant in this: Raymond Fung, who was Evangelism Secretary at the WCC in the late 1980s and early 1990s,⁹ and Lesslie Newbigin, bishop of the Church of South India, who on his return to Britain (ostensibly to retire) encountered a post-Christian culture that demanded serious missiological engagement.¹⁰ Fung's genius

churches in Wales or Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland offers more examples, but still lags well behind what is happening in England in terms of support from existing church denominations.

⁸ Cf *Mission and Evangelism: an ecumenical affirmation* (Geneva: WCC 1983).

⁹ Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision* (Geneva: WCC 1992).

¹⁰ See, among many others, Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (London: SPCK 1989).

was to create a theological bridge between the traditional concern of mainline churches for mission as social action and a more overt evangelistic approach that would call people to Christian discipleship, while Newbigin – as an elder statesman with impeccable ecclesiastical credentials – managed to convince church leaders who might otherwise have been suspicious of anything called ‘evangelism’ that it was possible to call others to faith in Christ without being either personally aggressive or intellectually compromised. Through his Gospel and Our Culture network (which still continues), he created a groundswell of support among British (especially English) church leaders and theologians. When the Anglican communion and the Roman Catholic churches both designated the 1990s as a Decade of Evangelism (or, for the Catholics, ‘New Evangelisation’), permission was given for a thoroughgoing reassessment of the state of the church in relation to Western culture. Though this Decade has been derided for its lack of ‘results’ in terms of converts, it created a new environment in which churches were able to be honest about their predicament and start to address the challenges presented by a post-Christian culture. In England, an ecumenical think-tank played a significant part in this, initiated in the late 1980s by Dr Donald English, a leading Methodist, and continued under the aegis of the Group for Evangelisation of Churches Together in England,¹¹ while the appointment of some visionary bishops in the Church of England prepared the ground in which the Fresh Expressions initiative could take root. Meanwhile, the growth of other spiritualities, especially paganism and other so-called ‘new age’ worldviews, raised questions that traditional theologians were incapable of addressing, and reinforced the view that, if there is to be a Christian future, believers must find new ways of expressing faith and being the church.

Meanwhile, in conservative evangelical circles a significant trend was moving in the opposite direction. If some Christians in the mainline were finding a renewed confidence in their faith, many who had been raised in an evangelical environment began to question it. In some ways, these churches had been more aware of cultural change, and more open to experimentation in relation to liturgy and worship. The Jesus people of the 1960s emanated from this ecclesiastical stable, as also did the numerous New Church (‘house church’) streams that grew during the 1960s and 1970s in the UK. Meanwhile, the charismatic movement tended to find most acceptance among these same groups. By the 1980s, conservative evangelicals in the UK not only had their own churches (distinct groupings within major denominations as well as independents), but their own national networks and festivals where worship was radically different from traditional liturgies, and appeared (at least on the surface) to be more contextualized within the culture, as organs were replaced by guitars and drums, and responses were both energetic and vocal. But whereas the circles populated by the likes of Raymond Fung and Lesslie Newbigin were asking far-reaching questions about the nature of the Gospel itself, here there was no room for theological questioning or experimentation, and when the noise of praise bands had subsided many activists in this scene found themselves physically exhausted and spiritually under-nourished. With the appearance of Dave Tomlinson’s book, *The Post-Evangelical* in 1995, such people came into the open and claimed a distinctive identity.¹² It is no coincidence that a revised edition of this book was published in 2003 in Zondervan’s *emergent ys* series, which is specifically geared to the emerging

¹¹ <http://www.gfe.org.uk>.

¹² Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (London: Triangle 1995).

church market.¹³ An early manifestation of this mindset was the rise of so-called ‘altworship’ (alternative worship), as those who felt betrayed by their tradition, but still clung to a residual faith, tried to reinvent church, mostly for their own personal healing but often with an intention of showing traditional evangelicalism just how wrong it was. Since the only expression of Christian spirituality offered in evangelical circles tended to be a service of worship, in which preaching usually predominated over other liturgical expressions, it is not surprising that the most obvious manifestation of this ‘post-evangelicalism’ was the reinvention of worship, because they had no other models to work with. Consequently, much ‘altworship’ came to be identified with the use of digital technology, on the one hand, or the adoption of practices like lighting candles, using incense, anointing, or prayers for healing – all things that other Christians had done for centuries, but which had been forbidden in evangelical liturgy, where the sermon was central.¹⁴

This rejection of previous forms of belief and styles of worship is now a major driving-force in some emerging churches, especially in the American context, where (at least in my experience) it is often easier to discern what they are against than what they are for. The existence of a significant number of people who feel betrayed by their upbringing in conservative churches presents a challenge for those who want to create emerging churches that will have a genuine appreciation for the historic tradition as well as an awareness of the culture. Their leaders will need to ensure that such new ventures are not hijacked by those whose main concern is to find healing for their previous hurts, and who would be satisfied with an individualistic and introspective form of spiritual expression. This is not to belittle the personal angst felt by such people, but if such concerns take precedence over effective mission they will undermine what I take to be the fundamental *raison d’être* of the emerging church.

Some key issues

However we look at it, the emerging church is a melting-pot of many different ideas and themes. It also represents a different style of operation than we have traditionally worked with, and in the process raises some big questions for the church at large, both traditional and emerging.

The emerging church reminds us that the debates over Gospel and culture are far from over, and in fact may just be beginning. The categories set out by Richard Niebuhr are no longer adequate for a post-modern, post-Christian, and post-secular culture.¹⁵

¹³ Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, revised North American edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2003). For empirical research on this topic, see Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (London: SPCK 2002); and a more personal account in Gordon Lynch, *Losing my Religion?* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2003).

¹⁴ The now infamous Nine o’clock Service in Sheffield was one of the most high profile instances of this trend, but was by no means unique. It would not be fair to imply that the sort of abuse of power that led to the collapse of the Nine o’clock Service was an intrinsic aspect of this scene, though issues of control have tended to be most visible in this part of the emerging church, and disenfranchised evangelicals still have problems over female leadership, and this has become a dominant theme in some emerging church conversations: see for example <http://www.opensourcetheology.net/node/233>; http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/2004/01/what_women_want.html; <http://www.livingroom.org.au/blog/archives/000995.php>; and each of these provides links to other sites where the topic is under discussion.

¹⁵ H Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 50th anniversary edition (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2001), originally 1951.

In the last twenty years, missiologists have introduced the language of contextualization, arguing that the incarnational nature of the Gospel requires that it assume a different form in different cultural circumstances.¹⁶ Emerging church people (like the majority of the population) just take the culture for granted. As Ben Edson puts it in his article, it is the water they swim in, and is not to be deconstructed or analyzed, but accepted as the context in which a bigger question is addressed, namely how we may follow Jesus faithfully in this culture. But he also highlights the diversity of culture, even from one city to another, and emphasizes that what his church does to contextualize the Gospel in Manchester is not necessarily transferable to other locations. In terms of the bigger picture, this raises other questions. What does contextualization really mean – and should contextualization of the Gospel be counter-cultural (a major theme in C N De Groot's critique of 'liquid church')? Moreover, while 'post-modernity' is repeatedly referred to as the general cultural context, there is no consensus as to what this actually is. In the articles here, there is not even agreement on how to spell it! Some talk of postmodernism or postmodernity as a self-contained cultural or philosophical system, while others (including me) hyphenate it in order to emphasize its provisionality, claiming only that whatever is going on in the culture, it is less of a coherent worldview, and more post- (in the sense of rejecting or questioning of) what went before it. The least we can say is that any movement that is defining itself by reference to such a chimera is bound to be very diffuse. Perhaps that is why more than one contributor here discusses the emerging church in terms of liminality.

Of course, the emerging church is not just emerging from post-modernity: it is also emerging from existing forms of church. Any local manifestation is either emerging from a positive relationship with the ancient tradition, or from a negative reaction against the historically more recent tradition of Protestant fundamentalism, which is not typically regressing to an independent congregational model, but in many cases affirms a spirituality that is entirely individualistic. If the wider culture poses some significant questions of process for emerging churches, then this consideration goes much deeper and wider. For the issues highlighted here in relation to the emerging church are but a microcosm of the bigger picture that is world Christianity today. The growth of the church in the non-Western world might well be 'the next Christendom', but it is not distinguished by the homogeneity that characterized the first Christendom.¹⁷ Quite the reverse, for the 'post-church faith' considered by Alan Jamieson is not a phenomenon restricted to disillusioned Western fundamentalists, but is also endemic in the burgeoning indigenous churches of the majority world, which have no clear connection with the historic traditions, not to mention significant numbers of converts who want nothing to do with anything called 'church' because they see that as a Western, and therefore imperialistic, construct.¹⁸ There are some major ecclesiological questions here. In what sense can a follower of Jesus with no connection to a faith community be regarded as authentically Christian? And how much connection need there be between a self-invented Christian community and the

¹⁶ Cf David Bosch's magisterial survey, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1991).

¹⁷ On this, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002); and for a succinct analysis of the consequences of the end of Christendom for the Western church, Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a strange new world* (Carlisle: Paternoster 2004).

¹⁸ Cf Timothy C Tennent, The Challenge of Churchless Christianity, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29/4 (2005), 171-177.

historic conciliar tradition for that community to be recognized as ‘real’ church? Perhaps I ought to add a third question, namely, are these the right questions to be asking today – or are they themselves part of the institutionalized mindset that we may need to divest ourselves of?

Two further points are worth highlighting, for they also relate to wider issues in practical theology and ecclesiology. The language of personal growth and spiritual journey is a major concern in the emerging church, and indeed for Western culture more generally. With family and other traditional networks fragmented, if not non-existent, many people feel that the only resource for a meaningful life will be found within themselves. So it is no surprise that two of our contributors (Philip Harrold and Alan Jamieson) specifically connect the concerns of the emerging church with James Fowler’s work on stages of faith.¹⁹ This search for personal ontological meaning features in every study that has sought to understand why other forms of spirituality are more attractive than what the church seems to offer, which suggests it is a matter to which both traditional and emerging churches should pay serious attention.

The importance of the personal spiritual journey is a perennial subject of discussion in the many blogs through which emerging church thinking tends to be disseminated. It is no coincidence that so many of the footnotes in these articles refer not to published books or journal articles, but to websites, blogs, discussion boards, and so on. I do not mind admitting that it has been an editorial challenge to check them all out and ensure that the web addresses given in the footnotes are accurate (and given the complexity of them, it is almost inevitable that some will still be incomplete, or even non-existent by the time this issue appears in print). If some readers are surprised to discover that the emerging church is as important as it seems to be from these articles, this may well be the explanation, for until recently there have been few published studies of the phenomenon, and most of the debate has taken place (and continues) in cyberspace. This is another challenge with wider repercussions: those of us who are concerned that our theological reflections should connect with the real questions that people are asking can no longer assume that we will be fully informed by what we discover in libraries, or even in newspapers or on television. The emerging church would certainly not be what it now is were it not for the worldwide web which has facilitated the organic growth of an international network of individuals and groups who are exchanging ideas about it on a daily basis. Indeed, without ready access to this form of instant communication, the emerging church may not exist at all.

I hope that this issue will not only inform those readers who know little about the emerging church, but will also make a contribution to the many conversations about it that are taking place around the world today. A particular strength of the articles assembled here is the fact that most of them are rooted in empirical research focused on particular expressions of emerging church. In one way or another, all the contributors have a personal involvement with such ventures, as well as being academic researchers. Their work also therefore serves as an example of how it is possible to reflect with integrity on one’s own spiritual journey in ways that can take us beyond the demarcation lines that are usually drawn between emic and etic

¹⁹ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* ((San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1991).

studies.²⁰ It has been a special pleasure for me to realize that virtually all the contributors are younger scholars, who bring particular insights to bear, as well as new methodologies that match their subject matter – all of which bodes well not only for the future of the emerging church, but for practical and contextual theology.

²⁰ For those not familiar with this terminology, the difference between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ studies is roughly the difference between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. The words were first coined by linguist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s, and came into general use following the appearance of a symposium edited by Pike, along with Thomas N Headland and Marvin Harris, *Emics and Etics: the Insider/Outsider Debate* (Newbury Park CA: Sage 1990).