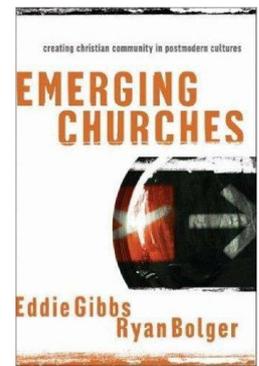


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Emerging Churches – Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures

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Challenging overview of emerging church, researched in UK/US by interview and written from the point of view of those involved, focussing on 40-50 churches in each of UK and US. Includes appendix with bios of 50 emerging church leaders. Many are the children of established church leaders. Emerging church books can be a mile wide and an inch deep, focussing on the coffee, candles and cool veneer of emerging church; this one isn't – Karen Ward.

Preface

If the church does not embody its message and life within postmodern culture, it will become increasingly marginalized.

As they did their research they identified 9 patterns which they regarded as missiologically significant. Most emerging churches are urban and therefore multicultural; authors anticipate that as they become increasingly rooted in their context, they will increasingly represent its cultural mosaic.

Emerging churches are not young adult services, GenX churches, churches-within-a-church, seeker churches, purposedriven or new paradigm churches, fundamentalist churches, evangelical churches – they are a new expression of church.

They follow the example of Jesus, who announced a gospel which was to participate with God in the redemption of the world. They integrate sacred and secular aspects of life, travel to spheres in society and make them holy. They build relationships with outsiders and share the good news at all levels.

1. A brief look at culture

Churches in the W face a missional challenge, increasingly cross cultural in nature. The chasm widens as mainstream culture diverts further from its spiritual heritage and society becomes increasingly pluralistic.

We have to study culture:

1. because of the incarnation
2. because cultural understanding has always been essential to good mission practice
3. because christendom and modernity are in rapid decline
4. because the W is in the midst of huge cultural shifts (modernity→postmodernity, westernisation → globalisation, communication revolution, shift in economic mode of production, breakthroughs in understanding human being on biological level, seeing convergence of science & religion not seen in centuries)
5. because the church is declining (weekly attendance in US is 40%, UK 8%)
6. because most current church practices are cultural accommodations to a society that no longer exists (we removed the symbolic, mystical, experiential to make space for logical and linear ways of thinking and living – marginalising oral, aural, visual worlds)
7. because the primary mode/style of communication has changed
8. because a new culture demands new organizational structures
9. because boomers (postwar to early 60s) are the last generation happy in modern churches; Gen X wants to use all 5 senses, not just words.
10. because of increasing appeal of spiritualities derived from other religions
11. because many Xtians no longer follow the religion of their parents – religion is now chosen rather than received

2. What is the emerging church?

What needs reviving must be by definition dying. But this is about evolution not revolution; 'we simply cannot go back to pews and song sandwiches' – Kester Brewin.

Emerging church is not about generational approaches to church life; it's not church for young people, it's church in a new culture. Perhaps it all began with Tomlinson's *Post-Evangelical* in 1995. Roger Ellis regards self as post-protestant and post-charismatic too; but prefers to say he's pre than post. Popularly the term emerging church has been applied to high-profile, youth-oriented congregations that grew rapidly, attract 20s, have contemp worship and promote selves to the Christian subculture through websites/word of mouth. Mark Scandrette describes it as a quest for a holistic spirituality.

They have 3 core practices:

1. identifying with the life of Jesus
2. transforming secular space
3. commitment to community as a way of life

These lead into another 6 marks:

4. welcoming the stranger
5. serving with generosity
6. participating as producers
7. creating as created beings
8. leading as a body
9. taking part in spiritual activities

'coffee and candles do not an emerging church make' 45.

We share common cause with the philosophers who revealed the oppressive nature of the master stories (metanarratives) of modernity. Bu tour shared journey ends once the deconstruction is complete, for we do believe there is one metanarrative, one master story that redeems our material reality, welcomes the outsider, shares generously, empowers, listens, gives space, and offers true freedom. It's the gospel.

3. Identifying with Jesus

Emerging church leaders are focussed not on church but on Jesus.

- 'Nothing I was doing on Sunday was what I thought Jesus would be doing if he were here' – Joe Boyd.
- 'to know Jesus is not an event, a ritual, a creed, or a religion. It is a journey of trust and adventure' – Jonathan Campbell

In Seattle a poll showed 95% of the nonchurched had a favourable view of Jesus. It's the church they dislike.

The Jesus of the emerging church is the Jesus of NT Wright, Lesslie Newbigin, David Bosch et al. Mission is redefined as going, not inviting. Church is seen as relationships – not focussed inwards, but multiple circles spreading through the community. Mission is joining in with what God is doing in the world. The gospel Jesus announced was that the kingdom of God was arriving. Mark 1 15-16, the good news is not that Jesus was to die on the cross to forgive sins but that God had returned to invite people to participate with him in the redemption of the world. Mark Scandrette: 'living in the way of Jesus is not a belief system but a reality. we want to help people consider Jesus as an option through the beauty of how we live our lives'. Emerging churches create missional communities.

4. Transforming secular space

'Secularization, far from undermining religion with its denial of the transcendent and its insistence on verification through the senses and the application of cold logic, has created a spiritual vacuum and a deep desire for integration'.⁶⁵

The modern church became highly ordered in the C16th-17th, responding to a newly literate membership. Modernity is characterised by control; and people brought that into the church, which became linear, ordered, systematic. Emerging churches remove linear expressions of faith, re-engage with visual culture, create a life-embracing spirituality. The charismatic movement perpetuates the sacred/secular divide, locating God outside the physical domain and focussing on ecstatic experience. Alternative worship relocates God in the physical domain, and is willing to encounter him through created things – symbols, icons, sacraments.

New paradigm churches (eg Vineyard) effectively give the material world over to secularisation, and meet in a warehouse with bright carpet, plastic chairs and a stage for the performers. Emerging church looks to see God more fully in what is around in the worship space, just as we see glimpses of God in the goodness/beauty of daily life. So it uses art, slides, candles, videos. Kester Brewin – ‘we want to speak about God in the vernacular’. Modern worship focusses on the mind; emerging worship on the whole human system.

Evangelism is seen as a way of life, not an event; it can take place from inside a subculture – eg the rave culture, from which alternative worship first arose. The story of NOS, which was at one time ‘the most exciting club in the UK, for Christians or nonChristians’.

‘If the emerging church errs in regard to culture, the church dies, but if it gets the gospel wrong, it loses its identity’ – 88.

5. Living as Community

‘In our current cultural crisis, the most powerful demonstration of the reality of the gospel is a community embodying the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus’ – Jonathan Campbell

The ecclesiology of emerging churches flows out of their understanding of the gospel, proclaimed and lived by Jesus, and the mission he entrusted to his followers. It’s a movt, not an institution. Secular space no longer exists; church is a 7 day a week existence, not a weekly respite from the world. Kingdom comes first, church follows. Believers have one another as their primary identity.

Emerging church leaders tend to begin with desire to create sth they can bring their friends to, eg a young adult service; then they move to house church; then realise that was just changing place not form; and focus on Jesus and kingdom, in community. See selves as family not institution, community not set of meetings. Focus on Jesus crucial; ‘if the definition of church is opened up without boundaries or structure, then it is just a warm, fuzzy, transient-shared experience and risks doing very little in causal connection to Jesus of Nazareth’ – Paul Roberts. Place of mutual accountability. A meeting still requires planning to be meaningful. Emphasis on mission and lifestyle. They divide only when too many for real relationships. K Brewin: ‘church for us is perhaps simply a network of the infected’, 114.

6. Welcoming the stranger

Inherent to the logic of modernity was a resolve to remove the ambivalent remainder, all that did not fit – nonconformists found no place there. ‘Modernity is evidenced in those areas in culture and society where control, homogeneity, and universals reign, whereas the areas that express freedom, difference and plurality are postmodern.’

A mission church integrates worship with welcome; the eucharist is the central act of worship, not an occasional observance. Mark Palmer: ‘maybe, if we share a meal, Jesus will do cool stuff in our midst as well’... Turning a welcoming space into a safe space. Emerging leaders are under no compulsion to stand up and fight for truth. Simon Hall – people more interested in their values and lifestyle than whether they have a coherent doctrine of the Trinity. Si Johnston: ‘Apologetics for us.. has moved from atomized abstract presuppositions to narrative-based apologetics of building plausibility structures using narrative and in particular the biblical narrative’ – intellectual barriers to belief are not discounted; but not assumed either.

In relating to postmoderns, Christians must have no hidden agenda; all they contribute to a relationship must be for the benefit of the other person – we are not salespersons but servants, and we don’t change beliefs but lives.

7. Serving with generosity

Merchandizers of consumer spirituality sell sensations to those desiring higher peak experiences. In church, the customer’s financial support is solicited in exchange for spiritual services rendered. Consumer churches

present a relationship with Jesus as the answer to widespread feelings of angst – ie, Jesus is turned into a product that satisfies need. But he won't – because the gospel is primarily about God's agenda, not ours. Revival comes not as a 'do it again, Lord', but out of the mission of the church. Social programs → a caring way of life – eg Eden project. Values – a servant gospel, an embodied gospel, demonstrating personal concern rather than proclaiming a message, thinking holistically. Tithing not for the church but by the church – if you have no salaried leader or building, you have significant financial resources.

8. Participating as producers

Sitting in pews; standing up; sitting down; the same format each week. It just wasn't working for us. As artists, writers, creative people, the single, fixed configuration of soft-rock worship and three-point linear preaching was a body not only we felt uncomfortable in but was dying around us. We were frustrated. We sat each week surrounded by some of the brightest talents in film, TV, theatre, art, social work, and politics who were made to watch in virtual silence because they didn't play guitar and didn't preach. These were the only two gifts that were acceptable as worship. It just seemed such a waste. We just thought it was outrageous that we had all these gifts that were being used in the corporate world, in the market economy, and were being snubbed for poorly done soft-rock and two-bit oratory in church. We saw that if worship was about gift, then what we brought to worship had to be integral to us, something meaningful from who we were. Kester Brewin.

In the early church, everyone had a voice at the meeting; priests did not run the gathering. The modernist church has become a place where people receive spiritual products – they have a portable faith. They have to be attracted by rock music, videos, drama, informal dress. Emerging churches try to be creative too; but as contributors to, not recipients of, worship. Being rooted in your culture means getting people to create their worship using the same tools they use the rest of the time. Everyone participates, contributes. Some leave teaching out – eg on a blog. Open worship planning meetings. Worship values silence, changes in pace, pauses – seen by trad church as loss of control.

9. Creating as created beings

With the creating of the kingdom, Jesus invited us to join him in redemptive activity. McDonaldization in the church – in appropriation of church growth principles (US), in seeker/purpose-driven churches. Jonny Baker: 'a lot of independent churches made modernizing moves and ended up with plastic coffee cups and school halls and fluorescent lights.. the aesthetic of alternative worship is much more about reengaging with tradition and ritual as well as with contemporary culture'. It's a theology of creativity; creativity which comes from creation. Worship services that reduce people to passivity or to routinized responses fail to recognize the true nature and calling of the individual.

Kester Brewin: 'all churches.. need to become places in their communities where people can exchange gifts – not just spiritual gifts but any gifts.. In the exchange of gifts, relationships are always catalyzed, always strengthened. Then and then only can the talk turn to the one who gave everything for us'.

Tradition is preserved not by reproducing the past but by seeking to recreate traditions so they can have the same impact today that they did when originally created. Leaders are there to hear, understand, and create an environment; they serve as hosts who create an environment of morale and trust where people can do their stuff – Roger Ellis.

Playfulness is important – as a corrective to the emotional intensity that leads to exhaustion, or to the sombre dullness that prevails as a pall over worship. Rituals are helpful if everyone can play an active role – participating in rituals is like learning to dance.

Danger that evangelicals fear contemporary culture – 90% in a recent poll. This is withdrawal.

Alternative worship isn't songs and performance licenses, but indigenous forms of worship – intercession and sculpture; using technology, popular culture.

10. Leading as a body

The task of leadership is to foster participation and creativity; to make space. No leadership doesn't work. The modern God wanted complete obedience; by reducing God to power, modernity removed the sense that a good and beautiful God participates with humans. Leaders now face the challenge of pursuing the kingdom and motivating others to do the same, without using the primary tool of control; how to dismantle systems of control and reconstruct a corporate culture according to the patterns of the kingdom. Emerging leaders ask how they are to express the life of Jesus in this culture at this time – these are not questions of church structure per se. Emerging churches form networks, not hierarchies. They are equally wary of the unchecked power of the charismatic leader – power leadership tends to produce downfall (NOS). Leadership has to be based on gifting, passion, track record; to be done by consensus, and bestowed by community.

Mike Breen, Sheffield – 'zero control, high accountability, low maintenance' leadership. From creating tasks to creating space, equipping members to equipping missionaries; from mobiliser to participant. Moving away from a paid professional ministry.

11. Merging ancient and contemporary spiritualities

Modernity created secular (and therefore sacred) space. Spirituality is a buzzword in the W – a reaction to the soul-starved secularization that has permeated culture. Interest in religion is at a low; in spirituality at a high (cf David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland – religion in postmodern times*, Blackwell 2000). Spirituality provides coping mechanisms. For evangelicals, it's something which is a counter to hyperactivism. Postmoderns are searching for a quiet place with subdued lighting to provide respite from the din of high-power amplifiers and the glare of strobe lights.

Wimber and the 'Third Wave' – style influenced by his Quaker tradition and his soft-rock musical preference; not stressing tongues like its predecessors; inviting Spirit rather than demanding particular manifestations. Charismatic worship styles haven't been adopted by emerging churches, who look instead for anything which is participative and integrates body and spirit – eg celtic spirituality. It's an eclectic spirituality; corporate, with reflection and silence, art central; includes liturgy, Jesus prayer, body prayers, monastic spirituality, eucharist.

Conclusion

Emerging churches are a new expression of church, not a generational thing. They focus on the example of Jesus, and a gospel which invites us to participate with God in the redemption of the world. To follow Jesus means to address all of reality, to build relationships with outsiders (not seeing them as evangelism objects – fundamentalists – or social objects – liberals. The calling is to infuse beauty into all things.

Appendix A – leaders in their own words

Mal Calladine - 'we believe that small groups can be 'NGOW' – Non-Guitar Oriented Worship.. Only two times in Scripture do Christians sing, and on both occasions they are in prison!

Mark Meardon – moving youth meeting to Friday night after 15 newly Christian young people left church on their first visit in the course of the opening hymn..

Examples of UK emerging churches included in the book:

- Vaux, London (Kester Brewin) – www.vaux.net
- Grace, London (Jonny Baker)
- Revelation, Chichester (Roger Ellis)
- Sanctus1, Manchester (Ben Edson)
- Boaz (Andrew Jones)
- Revive, Leeds (Simon Hall)
- Headspace, London (Si Johnston)
- Resonance, Bristol (Paul Roberts)
- Late late service, Glasgow (Andy Thornton)
- Tribal Generation, Sheffield (Mal Calladine)
- Eternity, Bracknell (Mark Meardo)