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Tracking the Emerging Church

Eddie Gibbs & Ryan Bolger

Here in the United States church attendance trends have remained fairly static overall. There appears to be a slight decline, but not such as to cause alarm. This state of affairs can lull us into a sense of false security. We can focus our attention on the impressive growth of a limited number of megachurches to provide inspiration and principles for church renewal and expansion. Yet we must take care that our attention is not being diverted from the challenges that face the church in North America. The majority of urban churches in traditional denominations are struggling to survive after decades of numerical decline. Church attendance is lowest in the most secularized areas of our nation, namely in the Pacific Northwest: Washington and Oregon states and throughout northern California to the Bay Area. We must also remember that the data on national church attendance is almost exclusively drawn from annual telephone surveys with questionable responses from callers who claim they did attend a worship service during the previous week, when in fact it might have been the week before last! Furthermore, we must not lose sight of the fact that the church-going population is aging, with the loss of the twenty-somethings and the decline in the numbers of children attending Sunday school.

During the past forty years the position of the Church in relation to the broader culture has been undergoing a transition. In a traditional context, churches occupied a central position in society, providing one of the pillar institutions of the community. With the move to modernity the church became increasingly marginalized to the point that many church leaders found it nec-

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essary to market aggressively to maintain their position or to make an impact as a new arrival on the scene. Then under post-modernity, the church lost its privileged position and found itself having to decentralize much of its ministry in order to penetrate a fragmented society.

While traditional denominations struggle to maintain their blanket coverage of the nation, there are discernable movements emerging, as part of the decentralization process, in the major population centers around the world – movements that are typically decentralized, spontaneous and grass-roots. They are particularly strong among the under 35s generations, although by no means confined to them. Churches identified with these new movements go by a number of names: “churches in emerging culture,” “alternative worship,” “postmodern church,” “simple church,” “liquid church,” “organic church,” or simply “the emerging church.” Personally, we prefer the last mentioned, as, in our view, the church is always emerging because it is a “pilgrim” church and a “becoming” church until Jesus brings it to completion and perfection at his Second Coming. These emerging church movements are to be found both within traditional denominations as well as among new, independent networks.

Reproducing Communities

The Emerging Church involves the revitalizing of existing congregations that will focus far more of their attention on outreach, decentralizing ministry, with high priority given to establishing an ever-growing network of communities committed to fellowship, ministry and witness. But the new church younger leaders are endeavoring to establish cannot be clones of existing churches, especially those that were originally established in a very different context, and which are no longer growing or making a significant impact on their surrounding communities. These new churches are not simply new because they have been birthed recently, but new in the sense that they are significantly different from the parent churches. Furthermore, the churches established them with this understanding and declared intention. They are not clones of the mother church, but draw from a different gene pool derived from the first and second centuries of the Christian movement!

The Emerging Church has transformed the idea of what church planting is, or even whether that term should be dropped altogether. Church planting is often associated with marketing

or franchising, both anathema to these emerging churches. They find fault with the meeting orientation of church life with its “come to us” mentality. Instead, the Emerging Church focuses on communities who live the faith 24/7, thus refusing a meeting orientation of church life. They have replaced the concept of “going to church,” to that of “being the church.” Perhaps, instead of church planting, what these emerging churches are doing are fostering “communities of the kingdom.” Instead of a focus on meetings, these believers seek to live as disciples, in community, in the context where God has led them. Others may join their community simply by participating in the activities of the kingdom.

Creating communities of faith and witness within the Emerging Church is of two kinds. First, there is the “*hub and cluster*” model. This refers to a church sending out teams of witnesses that it has raised and trained who are commissioned to form communities of witness, which will live out their common life within a particular segment of society, demonstrating an authentic Christian lifestyle within that cultural context, and reaching out to their networks of friends, neighbors and associates. As small groups of believers and seekers are established they are then drawn together into clusters for mutual encouragement, discipleship and ministry training, and to renew and expand their vision.

The second model consists of independent initiatives that often connect through “*decentralized networks*.” Often disenfranchised from the institutional church because of the huge divide between the culture within the church and those outside, informal communities develop to create an indigenous cultural expression of the faith. Over time, these independent groups discover each other and maintain regular contact through the internet, text-messaging, chatrooms and blogs as well as through periodic national or regional conferences and celebration events that provide the opportunity for personal networking.

Participatory Worship

It has often been said that while the Reformation gave us the theology of the priesthood of all believers, this was seldom translated into actual practice. From being *priest* dominated most churches became *pastor* controlled. The great majority of people in a congregation remained passive observers and audience. The pastor may have succeeded in enlisting a percentage of the con-

gregation in support ministries, as choir members, Sunday school teachers, small group leaders, etc. but eighty percent of church members were not mobilized in any kind of ministry.

Within the emerging church there is a strong emphasis on the centrality of worship. It is the main event and backdrop of everything that happens. Worship is not understood in terms of a one hour, once a week event, but as part of the rhythm of everyday life. They consider that the church's witness in the world is the overflow of their worship experience. Following the example of the early church, they make the fellowship-meal, which leads into a celebration of the Eucharist, as at the heart of their relationship with the Lord and each other. Because they believe that participation in worship is essential they are more concerned with multiplying small communities of believers than in building mega-churches. While they may encourage periodic large-scale gatherings for celebration, training and vision-casting, these must never distract from or displace the smaller gatherings. These fellowships of believers may be found in a wide variety of locations: homes, coffee shops, restaurants, offices, community centers and even pubs and clubs. The concern of these groups is to make the small groups accessible to their friends who are not yet Christians, who are on a spiritual journey just as they are themselves.

Their worship facilitates creativity. Each person is encouraged to contribute his or her talent in the expression of a form of worship that is multi-sensory. In preparation for the worship service, all will know the theme, and may contribute a poem, piece of art, compose a song, or provide a meditation or teaching on a passage of Scripture. The planning of the worship event is as significant as the event itself. The style of the worship will be indigenous to the culture, be that a particular ethnic expression or arising from urban and youth culture. The format and style of the worship event will also vary according to the topic and the occasion.

Participation by all is emphasized out of the conviction that every worshiper is considered a minister. The gift each brings is shared with all. Leadership will often move around the groups with an assigned leader for each worship service, who in turn acknowledges the leadership gifts of others in the group at the appropriate point. While there is a pre-arranged format, some groups are completely spontaneous. The liturgy (which literally means "work of the people") brings together form and freedom.

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It seeks not only to build up the community of faithful believers but also to reach out in mission by inviting those new to the community to become involved through participation—through doing, not watching. As we implied earlier, there is no place for the spectator in the emerging church. As one emerging leader said, “we give our guests nothing to ‘consume.’” They must participate in the community to appropriate its value.

Intentional Community

As we have already indicated, cell groups provide the foundational structure for the emerging church. In contrast to the megachurch emphasis, they believe that small is better both in terms of the greater participation it makes possible and also in the life transformation that it seeks to facilitate. Furthermore, cell clusters are potentially reproducible on an exponential scale, in contrast to endeavoring to grow large congregations, which are limited by the small pool of leaders able to lead and manage such a complex organization, as well as by the limited availability of real estate and the high cost of building construction. Each new cluster of cell groups provides further outlets and points of contact among the surrounding communities for service and witness. A key ingredient to the success of cells within emerging culture is that they are truly empowered to live as the church, with many of the elements of “church” in all its variety and complexity. When the cells come together for corporate worship, the celebration truly becomes a “tribal gathering.”

Some of the emerging churches have been inspired by the ancient Celtic model of intentional community and have translated its vision and values into the contemporary postmodern setting. One such network of cell groups is facilitated by an Order of Mission, whose members have taken vows of simplicity, holiness and obedience. They observe the monastic hours of prayer five times a day, but with young people receiving the daily items for intercession on their mobile phones in the form of text messages! We also know of a Vineyard church that shares a common purse and serves the poor in community as well.

Apprentices of Jesus

Groups of young people may live as a residential community, working in the locality and devoting their evenings and week-ends to befriend young people, visit schools and provide “drop-in” centers for young people, where they can “hang-out”

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in a safe environment, do their school homework, and discuss their interests and concerns with young Christians who are able to relate to them. Their incarnational ministry is sustained by a strong personal and corporate life of prayer, sometimes having a room set apart for this purpose. Such prayer rooms resemble a school activity center, providing opportunity for a variety of ways of engaging in prayer, with paints, colored markers, sheets of newsprint, modeling clay as media for self-expression. Engagement in prayer is further enhanced by candles, water for hand and foot washing, stones on which to paint a message, a map with pins and ribbons to invite other people to share in intercession, and chicken-wire with close pins holding prayer requests written on cards.

These communities of worship, intercession and community outreach are also learning communities, following an apprenticeship model. They may have a senior leader as a pastor who provides spiritual direction. The members learn together by action and reflection rather than on the theoretical classroom model.

Forms of Emergent Leadership

The task of the leader is to be ambitious for those around him or her that they might reach their full potential in Christ. Leadership is based not on position and title but on relationships. Leaders bring vision and maturity. They are not people who seek to control and thereby stifle initiative. They work by empowering people through making connections and forming teams in which individuals can learn from and facilitate each other. One of the emerging leaders, Don Pagitt, describes the type of leadership typical in the emerging church as “organic gardener” in contrast to the “general-in-charge,” or “CEO”. The organic gardener sees the combined action of air, weather and soil and understands the delicate balance between letting things happen and acting intentionally.

Leadership, according to this model, is not elitist, but rather emerges as part of a corporate culture in which everyone is listened to, affirmed and brought into appropriate relationships within a variety of ministry teams. They provide encouragement and opportunities for leaders to emerge thereby ensuring the continuing growth of the movement.

Comprehensive Witness

The younger generation of Christians does not drive a wedge between personal salvation and community service. They make Jesus their model for ministry, who came proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom. That kingdom was inaugurated in his person and the signs made evident through his ministry among the poor and needy, bring healing and deliverance. He addressed both physical and spiritual needs, often within the same person. They come to be not simply the church *for* the poor, but in many instances the church *of* the poor. They come with a servant heart, a long-term commitment, prepared to pay a high price in order to demonstrate identification with those whom they have come to serve. They are concerned for social justice and racial reconciliation, believing passionately that this is only made possible as people draw closer to Jesus. There are a number of impressive examples of clusters of small groups beginning to make a significant difference in high crime, inner-city areas—a contribution that is recognized and supported by the city authorities. In England, one of the most widely known networks is *The Eden Project*, located in Manchester. Currently it consists of ten teams each of 30 persons.

Most of the emerging church networks have an urban focus rather than contributing to the suburban expansion of the church. They recognize the strategic influence of urban values in shaping popular culture, as well as responding to the social deprivation and ethnic conflicts that plague our urban centers. Their music is in the genre of pop culture in combination with worship tradition across the ages and traditions of the Christian church. They are seeking to penetrate the rich variety of sub-cultures to be found in the urban scene: nightclubs, cafés, fitness clubs, etc.

Peering Into the Future

In his book, *Crisis and Renewal*, David Hurst describes the transition from hunters to herders, as nomadic African societies establish settled communities corralling their herds. He then relates this to entrepreneurial businesses that lose their creativity and sense of adventure. Within the church as in the business world, mission is replaced by strategy, roles become tasks, teams become structure, networks are formalized into systems and recognition is replaced by financial compensation.¹ Both churches and businesses need a process in place for continuous renewal,

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whereby the constraints can be removed by the organization re-inventing itself in order to release its ongoing creative potential.

As we visit various expressions of the emerging church we admit that we do not know how they will evolve—which represent the fringes and which the frontiers. In any dynamic and many faceted movement there will be expressions that survive, mature and grow and there will be others that flourish just for a brief time, only to disappear without trace. And there is always the danger that new movements become atrophied to the point where they themselves degenerate into bureaucratic institutions.

But that is to get ahead of ourselves. At this point, the greatest threat to the Emerging Church is not bureaucracy, but the lack of any sort of structure or resources to sustain a large number of churches within the movement. It is for this reason that many of these emerging initiatives have faded into oblivion. It is our hope that sufficient structure will coalesce around these emerging communities so that postmodern cultures will have access to the kingdom of God in a language they recognize as their own, and in a form that attracts because of its authenticity.

Writers

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NOTES

1. David K. Hurst, *Crisis and Renewal*. Harvard Business School Press, 1995, 2002.