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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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What Can We Learn from the Emerging Church Movement?

In most conversations about this new form of ministry, people give an example that they've read or heard about. Those stories produce (a) a vague idea of what "emerging church" means and (b) more blurriness than clarity. The movement takes many shapes and forms.

The emerging church began during the 1980s in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom—countries where church attendees are a tiny fraction of the population. An early example was the Nine O-Clock Service, an alternative-worship experience established for young adults in Suffield, United Kingdom. Led by artists and musicians, the attendance grew from thirty to more than six hundred. The average worshiper was twenty-four years of age and most came from non-church backgrounds. Another example—Ikon, led by Peter Rollins—holds events in pubs and on the streets of Belfast, Ireland.

U.S. examples of the emerging church: (a) The Distillery Church, Albany, New York, with a weekly attendance of about thirty, meets in an old appliance store. (b) The Terre Nova Church, Troy, New York, with a weekly attendance of about two hundred, meets in a nightclub. (Terre Nova is a new-church plant of the Mars Hill Church, Seattle.) Many types of emerging church have sprung up across the U.S.

For example, Distillery is a small group. The leader says it will start a new cell if it grows much larger. By contrast, Terra Nova contains several small groups. Both congregations want to be the Church but also want to connect with the culture around them.

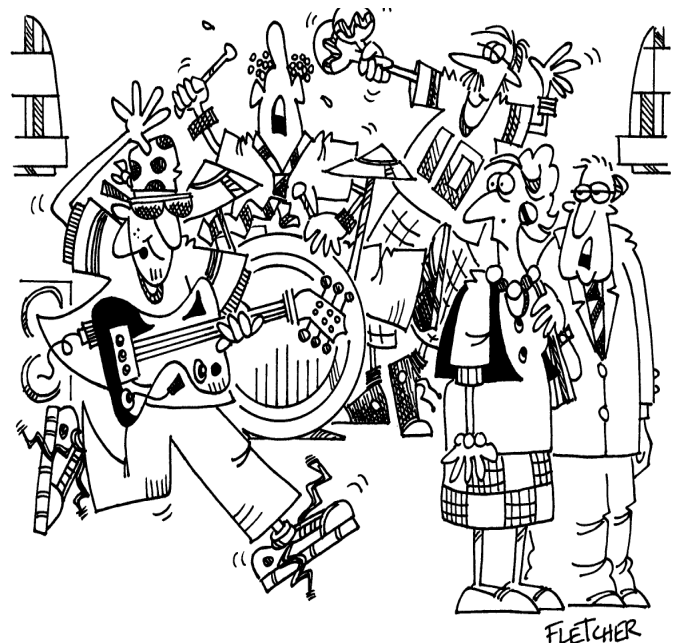
Most emergents use social media to organize "meet-ups" or "conversations" at a coffee shop or some neutral location. Whoever shows up discusses what they're collectively interested in. Many participants in these meet-ups attend traditional churches in the area; some attend an emergent church; and some don't attend worship anywhere. (Emergents use meet-ups as they try to establish a "cohort" that may eventually become a church group.) The meet-ups have no creeds or doctrines; open to various points of view, they welcome people who are open to conversation and "moving toward Jesus."

Perhaps that's why some refer to the emerging church movement as a "third way" of being Christian—one that rejects labels like conservative or liberal. Some emergent groups are sponsored by a congregation; others are not.¹

The emerging church is primarily a reform movement within Christianity. But most examples of the emerging church seem to emphasize reforming the *practices* (how we worship; the nature of how to be the church) more than reforming the *beliefs*. Among the wide variety of emerging church practices, the following are prominent: no denominational ties, no church building, alternative worship, and "doing the gospel" instead of merely "discussing the gospel."

Emergent churches are not trying to create a new religion or a new denomination. They are Christian, even if they have "let go" of some of the creeds. They don't have doctrines or dogmas but instead talk about "values." They say "everything is under scrutiny" but say "following Christ is the anchor."

Phyllis Tickle sees the emerging church movement as evidence of a historic seismic shift—on par with other big shifts such as the Great Reformation of the early 1500s. She asserts that Christianity is in another "hinge" time; the assumptions of the past are unraveling and we are weaving something new. Based on her analysis of Christianity's history, a hinge time can last for more



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than one hundred years. She believes that what we're experiencing now is not an anomaly and points out how Christianity has survived past tsunamis. Each time, the outcome is the same—Christianity spreads to more people and more places.

Each period of re-formation forces Christians and their institutions to re-address central questions of belief and practice. The answers that we've coasted along with for centuries don't seem adequate for many people, whether they are believers or non-believers. For example, the question "Where is ultimate authority?" was for many centuries answered with "The traditions and pronouncements of the established Church." After the early 1500s, Protestants answered the question of "Where is ultimate authority?" with "the Holy Scriptures" (*sola scriptura*—"Only Scripture"). The birth of Pentecostalism more than 100 years ago elevated "personal experience informed by the Holy Spirit" as another source of ultimate authority. (Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians now exceed five hundred million worldwide. But, according to Tickle, only about one in four emergent churches is Pentecostal.)

Other central questions, such as "How can we live responsibly as faithful adherents of one religion in a world of many religions?" force us to seek new answers as well. Tickle sees these theological challenges as opportunities for Christianity to spread. When people deal with new challenges, they look to the "edges" for creative responses—not to mainstream institutions. Thus, the emerging church movement is variously depicted as experimental, messy, nontraditional, and unorthodox.

Tickle predicts that eventually we'll see a shift in the institutionalized structures of Christianity. In the meantime, she argues that individuals are already crossing theological boundaries—blending and borrowing aspects from four strands of Christianity (conservatives, liturgicals, renewalists, and social-justice Christians).²

What can the mainline Protestant congregations learn from the emerging church movement? Traditional congregations can learn new ways of "doing" and "being" the Church to accomplish God's mission in the world. Examples:

1. New models of the Church. The emergents' model of Church is like an open-source network, a public collaboration—operating with concurrent input of agendas, approaches, and priorities that became possible with the widespread use of digital media. Emergents deconstruct traditional church features, arguing that the established Church is not the goal of the Gospel but an instrument to extend God's mission in the world.

2. Worship renewal or alternative worship. Emerging church forms of worship took hold in the U. S. in the late 1990s. In contrast to contemporary worship, emergents' alternative worship is more expressive and participatory; often includes secular contemporary music, films, and multiple technologies; may be called "the gathering"; and in some cases contains no sermon or "lecture" in the

traditional sense. Some emerging church worship draws on an eclectic range of ancient traditions such as the type of mysticism common among American Quaker congregations during the last two hundred year. Emergent worship practices develop, just like the emergent church, in a bottom-up rather than a top-down way.

3. Renewed emphasis on Christian practices. Peter Rollins says that emerging Christianity resonates with people who are tired of a religion in which believing the right thing is what it's all about. (Many emergents seem to hold this conviction in response to the narrow definition of "Christian" among some evangelicals.)

Among emergent church participants, a focus on and movement toward Christ—instead of focusing on a set of shared beliefs—defines a Christian. Thus, they welcome anyone who wants to be in conversation with them. They don't like to label someone as "out" because they don't hold exactly the same beliefs.

4. Start new churches as an expression of faith. Many emerging church participants wanted to be a different kind of Christian and did not intend to start new congregations. But, like so many renewal movements in Christian history, as a result of living out their Christian faith, the participants founded new faith communities that became churches. Unfettered by (a) the need to maintain a denominational brand or meet in a traditional church setting and (b) belief in the traditional clergy-laity divide that limits the number of possible leaders, their numbers grew rapidly.

Emerging church or emerging ideas? Some people argue that even the label of "emerging church" has become so muddled that we should drop its use. Whatever its label, the movement has always been about emerging ideas. Not all ideas are created equal, and sorting the wheat from the chaff continues in and around the movement.

The emerging church movement poses no threat to Christianity. Rather, it enhances its spread and health. There is no need for anger about the traditional church's present condition or guilt about missed opportunities in the past. The arc of change is longer than any of our lifetimes, and we do not yet know the impact of the emergent church's response to that change.

How can our congregation make a place for people who are attracted to new forms of being the Church?

¹The terms emerging or emergent refer to this Christian movement, but the Emergent Church is also the name of an official organization: the Emergent Village.

²Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008)