

The Emerging Church Movement and Young Adults

Gerardo Marti

Davidson College

People in the Emerging Church Movement do not define themselves by conventional terms like common church membership or denominational affiliation. Emerging Church participants have a contested relationship with the mainstream of Christianity and take on a badge of being “misfits” and “outsiders.” Yet all share a sense of mission regarding the future of Christianity. Scattered across the U.S. and U.K., they maintain their connections by reading similar books (including Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, and Tony Jones), attending conferences with like-minded believers, experimenting with new forms of Christian practice, and expanding the network of brothers and sisters connected to shared concerns even though they do not often see each other face-to-face. Together they are seeking to revitalize Christianity and extend new values and practices in their own religious communities, whether their local gatherings are sanctioned as official “church ministries” or not.

Defining the Emerging/Emergent Church Movement

Often called simply “Emergent,” this social network-dependent initiative to revitalize Christianity for the contemporary world has created a sensation not only among Evangelical Protestants (where the movement began) but also among Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox Christians. There are Emergent cohorts in every major city including Atlanta, Baltimore, Charlotte, Kansas City, and Seattle, and the movement has spawned many special interest Emergent groups like Emergent Women, Globemerging, Presbymergent, and Queermergent. Launched in the United States, the Emergent “conversation” is now a transnational phenomenon that has spread widely (especially in English-speaking countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom), drawing both critics and enthusiasts. The web-based community

Emergent Village (www.emergentvillage.com), created in 2001, serves as a clearinghouse for ideas, announcements, gatherings, resources, and conferences. Christian publishers devote entire book series to “Emergent” products featuring bright, pop-culture echoes of styles and colors. Most surprising, the spread of the movement is evident in recent moves toward recognizing “Emergent Jews” and even creating “Emergent Muslims.”

Much of the leadership and all of the focus on outreach among participants in the burgeoning movement was initially based on twenty-somethings, seeking to gather information and re-formulate strategies for dealing with challenges presented by contemporary young adults. The Emerging Church Movement took shape through an initiative of The Leadership Network, a private Evangelical organization that actively stimulates innovation and dialogue among church leaders. In the late 1990s, the organization established the Young Leaders Network for pastors and youth ministers under 40 to confront what they perceived as the greatest problem of the contemporary church, namely, its lack of being “contemporary.” These leaders believed the church was losing the next generation due to its failure to keep up with the culture and concerns of younger cohorts. In short, the Emerging Church Movement began as a “youth-oriented” movement rooted in a concern for the religious experience of young adults – especially as a corrective to Conservative Evangelicalism – that has practical consequences for the religious communities being created by and for young adults.

Shortly after the formation of the Young Leaders Network in the late 1990s, a string of conferences (especially the New Edge Conference and the Terra Nova Project) and various Internet communities raised a number of issues on interpreting the Bible, experiencing ancient-future liturgy, and reinventing contemporary evangelism. Much of the conversation within the Emerging Church Movement takes Conservative Evangelicalism as its base of critique, and much of the solution to establishing a proper view of Christianity consists of “de-conversion” from fundamentalist-tinged orientations. For some, the Emerging Church Movement is merely a re-invented Evangelicalism. But this minimizes the

resonance that the overall message of the movement has to Mainline, other Christian, and non-Christian believers.

With so many voices and organizations participating in the Emerging movement, few are willing to define it. The lack of systematic coherence among Emerging Christians contributes to the frustration of more Conservative counterparts working within their rich, inherited, and often elaborate theological system furnished with holistic frames of critique that finely distinguish among the varieties of modern Christianity. In addition, social media lends coherence to the Emerging Church Movement as a dispersed community. The network of relationships persist through Twitter, Facebook, and other social media because participants in the Emerging Church Movement readily use social media as viable, legitimate, and personal means for keeping in touch. Even within the contradictory mixture of Emerging/Emergent standpoints, there are a few dominant themes within the movement so far.

First, *Emerging Christians are anti-institutional*. Within the Emerging Church Movement is a greater openness among leaders for creating small, informal, and non-hierarchical assemblies that are not connected to theological seminaries or denominational structures. Although the long-term sustainability of such groups is uncertain, the variety of gatherings rapidly being formed creates an experimental, entrepreneurial dynamic that propels leaders of such gatherings to connect with others. An online gathering is now happening through the near-constant stream of “tweets” through Twitter channels managed by Emerging Village and the TransFORM Network (<http://twitter.com/emergentvillage> and <http://twitter.com/trans4m>). Other face-to-face and online conferences are announced through these streams.

Second, *the softer doctrinal stance of Emerging Christians on issues ranging from salvation, sanctification, and eschatology – especially combined with their greater concern for social justice – encourages a new form of ecumenicism*. Mainline and Evangelical Christians who formerly found themselves divided over issues like gay rights and aggressive evangelistic tactics now meet together in a common critique of “Evangelicals” coupled with a strong

desire to create tradition-rich, culturally-relevant local church experiences. Groups from various Christian orientations are beginning to partner on social initiatives (for example, vocal and legislative support for gay marriage) and share ideas on creating liturgies that mix different types of instrumentation and new media technology.

Third, *church leaders who embrace the orientation of Emerging Christians also embrace young adults into leadership and decision-making in their local church context.* For most outside the movement, *Emerging equals Under 30*, an equation that legitimizes giving greater programmatic control to young adults. Inside the movement, participants have a much broader range of ages, and it is not unusual to meet people at live conferences who are in their 50s and 60s; the distinction is that young adults are welcomed and expected to actively take leadership responsibility. In short, sympathy with the Emerging Church Movement coincides with encouraging young adults to lead worship, speak in public assemblies, direct project teams, and create new programs as a way to “shift” the culture of the church toward the next generation.

Overall, the Emerging Church Movement attempts to rescue core aspects of Christianity from the entanglement of modernity, bureaucracy, and right-wing politics. For example, organizationally, today’s Christianity is viewed as burdened with CEO-styled pastors, excessive concern for organizational maintenance with routinized, predictable, yet culturally-irrelevant ministry practices. Slick, mall-styled megachurches with five-point sermons and large carbon-footprint campuses are targets for criticism. On an individual level, Christianity is seen as overly concerned with simplistic views of gaining salvation, oppressive anxieties about personal morality, judgmental stances toward other religious commitments, and apathy toward social justice issues like gender equity, race relations, and environmentalism. In addition, the movement is recently taking on transnational concerns, discovering church leaders and championing social concerns outside the United States in order to lift themselves from an over-identification with American pop culture. Finally, while the movement is based

on mostly white, urban/suburban, and middle-class constituents, there is an earnest attempt to expand that base to become more multicultural.

The many voices associated with the Emerging Church Movement intentionally blur lines of doctrine and ecclesial practice to acknowledge the variety of practices in Christian ministry and embrace a tolerance for plurality. Several texts are frequently cited as authoritative on the movement, most especially Brian McLaren's 2004 book *A Generous Orthodoxy*. An important theological base for the movement is the embrace of non- or anti-foundationalism as a philosophical base (for example, *Beyond Foundationalism* by Stanley James Grenz and John R. Franke). However, the power of the movement goes beyond reworking Christian ideology and reframing theological perspectives. Practically speaking, the Emerging Church Movement results in changes in the practice of local congregations.

Provocative Aspects of the Emerging Church Movement

An intriguing development over the past decade is neo-monasticism, a broad term emphasizing "intentional communities" where people live close to one another in a specific area, commit to compassionate service to each other and the local community, and attempt to live self-sustaining lifestyles often combining craftsmanship, environmentalism, and charitable work. Neo-monasticism does not emphasize celibacy and is not committed to poverty but rather uses historical elements of community living to cultivate a deeper level of authentic, Christian fellowship that is reminiscent of the first church community described in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2 where "all the believers were together and had everything in common," meeting together daily for worship, sharing food and faith, "with gladness and simplicity of heart." Shane Claiborne, the founder of an influential intentional communities within this movement, calls his community "The Simple Way" (<http://thesimpleway.org/>). Neo-monastic, intentional communities exist across the country, yet they do not become congregations to themselves. Instead, they encourage members to commit to local congregations as an extension of their commitment to the local community. These groups are not intended to be

insular but missionally expansive and engaged. The focus on micro-community and sustainable living along with a de-centering of doctrinal correctness and social conservatism resonates with the Emerging Church Movement as a whole.

While neo-monastic communities are intriguing and have a romanticized notoriety, new forms of liturgical gatherings are far more accessible and draw far more criticism—at the same time that practices embedded in these changes have been adopted far more widely. A fundamental aspect of the emerging church movement is challenging traditional liturgy by reconsidering the purpose of congregational gatherings, negotiating a synergy between “ancient” and “contemporary” rituals, and radically expanding opportunity for participation and leadership in worship services. The movement seeks to shake people out of their ordinary and familiar experience of church to create a fresh response to God in worship. Spontaneity is valued: not the spontaneity of Spirit manifestations in prophecies or supernatural ecstatic actions, but the unforced, free response of individuals to relate to each other and to God in speech and act. The emerging church strives to create open spaces for reflection and response. The purposes of services are, then, not to “lead” people to God through a process but to create open opportunities to see/hear and respond to God. Some emerging church gatherings combine performance and dialogue, Christian symbols with anti-ritualistic presentation. Fostering conversation that mixes clear structure with potentially awkward, unknown “space” for interactions is at the center of these efforts.

The re-contextualization of the Christian faith in these gatherings is intended to encourage a fully normal, everyday, “non-religious” life, meaning a life stripped of any seemingly false rituals or cute reminders of crosses, doves, fish, Bible verses or slogans like WWJD and “God Doesn’t Make Junk.” At Solomon’s Porch, art is displayed along all the walls—original art mostly from within the congregation. On the far wall is a large cross, perhaps the only vestige of the original architecture of this refurbished church, but around the bottom of this wall and creeping up both sides of the cross are a series of portraits, varied head-and-shoulders pictures of men and women from the congregation. It is

never stated explicitly, but the placement of parishioners' portraits immediately struck me as a reappropriation of pictures of historic Christian saints. Every evangelical learns through Bible study that Paul addresses the "saints" in his New Testament letters, and that he means ordinary believers gathered in the congregation. All Christians are "saints." And though it may not be immediately intentional, it is clear that Solomon's Porch is creating a prominent place for the display of their everyday saints, giving their pictures a special, even sacred, space next to the cross at the focal point of the interior. The use of artists from the congregation to freely create portraits of their friends and fellow members in this way is a type of contextualization of contemporary culture assimilated into the experience of the church.

The serving of communion is often a strategic place for mixing what can often be a serious, somber time with lighter conversation alongside highly ritualistic practices and reference to the passion of Christ. Whether grape juice or wine (and emerging churches tend to think of grape juice as an unnecessary sanitization of Jesus's inaugurated practice, so wine is much preferred), the more surprising element is what is used for bread. Sliced bread from the supermarket is much too crass for the sacredness of the moment, so regular baked bread is preferred. Indian Naan bread is used, and Jewish Matzoh wafers can provide historical ambiance. Sometimes communion is done individually through pulling pieces of bread and dipping them into a chalice of wine at two or three tables distributed around a room. Other times people are asked to "serve each other" by handing bread to others for breaking or even breaking off pieces for others. Shared cups are not common (too many health issues today) nor are pre-loaded plastic cups (which evoke supermarket disposable packaging that demeans the importance of the moment). Instead, the act of breaking bread and the act of pouring wine to drink add to the communal activity. It is not unusual for conversation to break out such that "communion" can become a moment for conversation, catching up or meeting someone new.

Nearly every emerging church leader I've spoken with believe they talk too much in their gatherings, yet can't seem to get away from occupying the

provocative, vision-sharing, direction-defining moment willingly given to them by the congregation (who come to hear the leader). The emerging church leaders who occupy prominent speaking roles stress non-hierarchical and highly relational modes of leadership. They remain charismatic leaders who attract and maintain followers.¹ The attempt by leaders here is to minimize exploitation, maximize authentic relationship, and achieve humane fulfillment of religious values.

Liturgical gatherings in the Emerging Church Movement allow for the full engagement of even the most complete non-believers. As such, no ritual is closed and all interaction is open. In scheduled “gatherings,” actions and sequences of events are explained briefly. For things left unexplained, insiders hospitably guide guests through welcome times, corporate prayer, serving of the elements of communion, or after service functions. The emerging church movement may appear to be an insiders-only zone, but the attempt is to hold on to aspects of marginality, elevate simple human connections, and allow for those most recently incorporated to remind longer-term members of what it is like to not belong to the group.

Conferences as Expressions of the Broader Movement

Every year since 2000, Emergent Village (an online hub for conversations and events) has hosted a conference with leading theologians and philosophers for three days of “conversation.” Sitting semi-circled around a speaker in a room (the first conference had around 80 attendees, and a decade later in 2010 there were over 300), these “gatherings” welcome anyone who wishes to hear extended remarks from prominent thinkers on issues that connect with current renegotiations in Christian thinking on church, theology, and the world. Events like this are special for insiders to the Emerging Church Movement. Although they share similar interests in reconsidering the practice of Christianity and read

¹ Here I use Max Weber’s definition of central figures who speak and act in ways that resonate with the needs and desires of followers as they accentuate and call for value-rational ways of living, provoking followers to vision-centered morality and ideal-motivated relationships inside and outside of the congregation.

similar books and blogs, they are scattered and do not often see each other face-to-face. As I was told several times by participants at this meeting, “It’s not about the meetings. It’s about getting together after the meetings.” Old friends continued to “catch up” as new friends were brought into the conversation.

I attended an Emerging Church conference in 2010 that brought together people from across America, filling the chapel of an established church. At times comforting and at other times intentionally provocative, the conference provided a meeting ground for issues of Christian community mixing inspiration with practicality. About a dozen workshop sessions expanded on specific issues: constructing a new hermeneutic of atonement, setting up intentional communities, experimenting with liturgy, describing homosexuality in the church, etc. In one session, a megachurch pastor described his “coming out” as a gay man on a Sunday morning. One woman began to cry, saying she has struggled for years to serve God in youth ministry while hiding her sexual orientation. It was her first conference; these new relationships showed her how it was possible to embrace both her spirituality and her sexuality. In these and other sessions, the tone was less philosophical than relational as the conference emphasized tolerance, sensitivity to trauma and brokenness, and a willingness to support anyone “sincere” toward God and themselves.

The vocational ministry of those I heard and spoke with all seem to emphasize their ministry to outsiders as outsiders themselves. Kathy Escobar, a leader of an intentional community and church called The Refuge in Denver, Colorado, defines her ministry as being committed to “the messy, the hurting, the marginalized.” They characterize themselves as people who wish to have a concrete Christian identity while allowing openness in the experience and approach of the faith of others. They desire to foster a community where each person strives to keep their own lines (beliefs and moral boundaries) while not imposing them on others.

Relating the Emerging Church Movement to the Spirituality of Emerging Adults

As a newer movement that attempts to leave behind much of the “baggage” of mainstream Christianity, the Emerging Church Movement does not define itself solely as a young adult phenomenon; however, the movement largely consists of people who have already rejected forms of orthodox Christianity (especially evangelical fundamentalism) and are seeking new ways to express their lingering faith. The Emerging Church Movement does not appeal equally to all young adults. Specifically, the movement does not seem to appeal to younger, college-age adults but rather to older, more educated, and “still single” young adults finding outlets for their Christianity. The most prominent leaders right now are those who have long tenure in Emerging Church Movement, so they are in their mid-30s to late 40s. Through emerging church events and dialogues, they find places that allow for independence of thought, expression of questions and opinions, and an uncertain commitment to structures. These “older” young adults may be active careerists or they may be in seminary, but what distinguishes them is their ability to articulate an “expertise” on what “church” is and how it has failed. For young adults, the Emerging Church Movement creates religiously-oriented, interactive spaces defined by an active renegotiation of orthodoxy. Established congregations may choose to incorporate many of these negotiated practices or perhaps seek to broaden the openness and egalitarianism of their ministries. Regardless, the practices of the Emerging Church Movement have already found their way into living rooms, pubs, and coffeehouses (as well as church basements and alternative meeting times) in a covert manner as young adults decide to create places regardless of the level of encouragement or sponsorship of their local churches. It is uncertain whether and how much the movement will shape conventional congregational life, but it is indeed certain that these new attitudes and practices are creating a viable, if scattered, community of emerging Christians.