

# The Emerging (Emergent) Church

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(Redirected from Emergent church)

The **emerging church** (sometimes referred to as the **Emergent movement**) is a Christian movement that crosses a number of theological boundaries: participants can be described as Evangelical, post-evangelical, Liberal, post-Liberal, charismatic, neocharismatic and post-charismatic. Participants seek to live their faith in what they believe to be a "postmodern" society. Proponents of this movement call it a "conversation" to emphasize its developing and decentralized nature, its vast range of standpoints and its emphasis on dialogue. What those involved in the conversation mostly do agree on, is that they are disillusioned with the organized and institutional church and support the deconstruction of modern Christian worship, modern evangelism, and the nature of modern Christian community.

The movement often favors the use of simple story and narrative, occasionally incorporating mysticism. Members of the movement often place a high value on good works or social activism, sometimes including missional living or new monasticism. While some Evangelicals may emphasize eternal salvation, many in the emerging church emphasize the here and now, and the need to create a kingdom of heaven on Earth.

Some have noted a difference between the terms "emerging" and "Emergent." Whilst *emerging* is a wider, informal, church-based, global movement, *Emergent* refers to an official organization, the Emergent Village, associated with Brian McLaren, and has also been called the "Emergent stream."

Key themes of the emerging church are couched in the provocative language of reform, Praxis-oriented lifestyles, Post-evangelical thought, and incorporation or acknowledgment of political and Postmodern elements.

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### ***[edit]*** Definitions

The **emerging church** (also known as the emergent church movement) is a Christian movement of the late 20th and early 21st century whose participants seek to live their faith in modern society by emulating Jesus Christ irrespective of Christian religious traditions. It is worth noting that members of the emerging church prefer this term, as

they see themselves as being another element within the wider church. The term "movement" is not usually preferred by those within the emerging church.

Dr. Stuart Murray, drawing on international research, stated the definition:

Emerging churches are so disparate there are exceptions to any generalisations. Most are too new and too fluid to clarify, let alone assess their significance. There is no consensus yet about what language to use: 'new ways of being church'; 'emerging church'; 'fresh expressions of church'; 'future church'; 'church next'; or 'the coming church'. The terminology used here contrasts 'inherited' and 'emerging' churches. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup>

Ian Mobsby quoting work by Larson & Osborne has identified a functional definition:

The use of the phrase 'emerging church' appears to have been used by Larson & Osborne in 1970 in the context of reframing the meaning 'church' in the latter part of the twentieth century. <sup>[3]</sup> This book, contains a short vision of the 'emerging church' which has a profoundly contemporary feel in the early twenty-first century ... Larson & Osborne note the following themes: Rediscovering contextual & experimental mission in the western church. Forms of church that are not restrained by institutional expectations. Open to change and God wanting to do a new thing. Use of the key word ... "and". Whereas the heady polarities of our day seek to divide us into an either-or camp, the mark of the emerging Church will be its emphasis on both-and. For generations we have divided ourselves into camps: Protestants and Catholics, high church and low, clergy and laity, social activists and personal piety, liberals and conservatives, sacred and secular, instructional and underground. It will bring together the most helpful of the old and best of the new, blending the dynamic of a personal Gospel with the compassion of social concern. It will find its ministry being expressed by a whole people, wherein the distinction between clergy and laity will be that of function, not of status or hierarchical division. In the emerging Church, due emphasis will be placed on both theological rootage and contemporary experience, on celebration in worship and involvement in social concerns, on faith and feeling, reason and prayer, conversion and continuity, the personal and the conceptual. <sup>[4]</sup>

Dr. R. Todd Mangum, Associate Professor of Theology and Dean of Faculty at Biblical Seminary, describes it this way:

“Emergent” is a loosely knit group of people in conversation about and trying experiments in forwarding the ministry of Jesus in new and different ways, as the people of God in a post-Christian context. From there, wide diversity abounds. “Emergents” seem to share one common trait: disillusionment with the organized, institutional church as it has existed through the 20th century (whether fundamentalist, liberal, megachurch, or tall-steeple liturgical). Its strengths: creative, energetic, youthful, authentic, highly relational. Its weaknesses: somewhat cynical, disorganized, sometimes reckless (even in the theological ideas willing to be entertained), immature <sup>[5]</sup><sup>[6]</sup>

Proponents of this movement call it a "conversation" to emphasize its developing and decentralized nature as well as its emphasis on interfaith dialogue rather than verbal evangelism. This idea of 'conversation' also emphasises some of the Trinitarian basis to many of the emerging churches. (see Ian Mobsby's reflection on this here) <sup>[7]</sup>

### ***[edit] Membership***

Emerging churches can be found throughout the globe, predominantly in North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa. Some attend local independent churches or house churches<sup>[8][9]</sup> labelled "emerging" while others worship in traditional Christian denominations.<sup>[10]</sup>

### ***[edit] History***

There has been a strong bias in the US to ignore a history to the Emerging Church that preceded the US Emergent organization, which began with Mike Riddell and Mark Pierson in New Zealand from 1989, and with a number of practitioners in the UK including Jonny Baker, Ian Mobsby, Kevin, Ana & Brian Draper, Sue Wallace amongst others from around 1992.<sup>[11]</sup> The influence of the Nine O'Clock Service has been ignored also, due its notoriety, yet much that was practiced there was influential on early proponents of alternative worship.<sup>[12]</sup> The US organization emerged in the late 1990s.

What is common to the identity of many of these emerging church projects that began in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, is that they developed with very little central planning on behalf of the established denominations.<sup>[13]</sup> They occurred as the initiative of particular groups wanting to start new contextual church experiments, and are therefore very 'bottom up'. Murray identifies 'emerging churches' beginning with:

An apparently spontaneous phenomenon ... without central planning, coordination, or consultation. Loose networking, shared stories, 'blogging' on websites and developing friendships were all that connected otherwise isolated initiatives ... The churches that have emerged in the past few years have been remarkably diverse ...<sup>[14]</sup>

Many emerging churches ... were not intended to become churches but developed into churches as those involved found their ecclesiology transformed by engagement with the community they were serving ... They grew into churches as those involved found the culture gap between new Christians and church too wide ...<sup>[15][16]</sup>

### ***[edit] Values and characteristics***

#### ***[edit] Trinitarian based values***

A number of pieces of research including Gibbs & Bolger have identified a number of core based values in the international emerging church drawing on narrative action research.<sup>[17]</sup>

These include:

- Who take the life of Jesus as a model to live (life as spiritual journey).
- And who transform the secular realm.
- As they live highly communal lives.
- Welcome those who are outsiders.
- Share Generously.
- Participate.
- Create.
- Lead without control (unity in diversity).
- And function together in spiritual activities.

A number of researchers have further explored what underpins these shared international values.<sup>[18][19]</sup> Research suggests that it is a Trinitarian Ecclesiology that informs these values:

I suggest that perhaps the Emerging Church had found, or been led to a Trinitarian ecclesiology which had inspired a model, the values of which reflected God's desire for what the emerging church should be. This is what Volf is talking about in *After our Likeness*. A Church whose values reflect the Trinitarian God.<sup>[20]</sup> This development appears not to have been a consciously mediated action, but to have emerged out of the experience and practice of those involved in the projects. Is this a God-led re-imagining of the Church? I believe that it is.<sup>[21]</sup>

This position resonates strongly with postmodern theology:

Ultimately then, we enjoy the fullness of community as, and only as God graciously brings us to participate together in the fountainhead of community, namely, the life of the triune God ... The community that is ours is nothing less than shared participation - a participation together - in the perichoretic community of Trinitarian persons.<sup>[22]</sup>

Research therefore suggests that the Emerging Church is centred on the combination of two models of Church<sup>[23]</sup>, and possibly two models of Contextual Theology<sup>[24]</sup> that draw on this Trinitarian basis. The Mystical Communion Model and Sacramental models of Church,<sup>[25]</sup> and the Synthetic and Transcendent models of Contextual Theology.<sup>[26][27]</sup>

So the Emerging Church, in reaction to the missional needs of postmodern culture, has re-acquired a Trinitarian basis to its understanding of Church as Worship, Mission and Community, in reaction against some forms of conservative evangelicalism and other more reformed ecclesiologies since the enlightenment, that have dumbed down on the Trinity which, it is argued, has caused problems with certainty, judgementalism and fundamentalism and the increasing gap between Church and contemporary culture.<sup>[28]</sup>

## **[edit] Post-Christendom views concerning Mission & Evangelism**

Christendom as a concept has been around for a long time. It has been based on the concept of creating and maintaining a Christian nation by ensuring a close relationship of power between the Christian Church and its host culture.<sup>[29]</sup> In more Conservative forms of church, this mindset based on a power discourse is maintained. Today, Churches drawing on this power-discourse, still attempt to use this power when considering mission and evangelism.<sup>[30]</sup> The Emerging Church considers this power-discourse to be unhelpful for mission and evangelism in the postmodern world, and stands against these more Christendom values which have been summarized as:<sup>[31]</sup>

- Creation of a hierarchical church society and the loss of lay (Laos) vitality.
- Power-hierarchy created an institution rather than a community.
- Orientation towards maintaining the status quo. As church moved from the margins to the center of society.
- Wanting to control history and bring God's Kingdom through political power. Compelled all to be 'Christian' with resultant loss of true mission.
- A punitive rather than restorative approach to justice.
- An interpretation of Church history that marginalizes the laity, dissident movements, women and the poor.
- Forms of Church that actively dis-empower the laity from active participation in leadership and liturgy.
- Inattentiveness of the criticisms of those outraged by the historic association of Christianity with patriarchy, warfare, injustice and patronage.
- Partiality for respectability, top-down mission and hierarchical church government.
- Approaches to evangelism that rely excessively on 'come' rather than 'go' initiatives.
- Thinking that the Christian story is still known, understood and widely believed within society.
- Preoccupation with the rich and powerful.

So the Emerging Church, seeks a more post-Christendom approach to being Church and Mission:

- Renouncing imperialistic approaches to language and cultural imposition, making 'truth claims' with humility and respecting other view points.
- Holistic forms of faith - that seek to integrate the public private split.
- To move from the center to the margins of the relationship between Church and political power.
- From privilege place in society to a voice amongst others in pluralism.
- From control to witness.
- From maintenance to mission.
- From institution to movement.

These values have not come without criticism, largely from the more Conservative Christian Right, but many in the Emerging Church have argued that this is because, those coming from a more Conservative perspective do not critique their attitudes concerning Christendom, the seeking of a power relationship between Church and culture. Further, the Emerging Church is trying to take a balanced 'both and' approach to Redemptive & Incarnational Theologies. The Emerging Church critiques Conservative Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism as being 'overly redemptive' in focus and therefore in danger of over-condemning people where the 'Good News' is communicated in aggressive and angry ways that is less than good news.<sup>[32]</sup> The Emerging Church therefore, takes a more loving and affirming approach (as Jesus in the Gospels) with postmodern elements of culture where people distrust anything that is associated with power-discourses. So rather than the Emerging Church having nothing to offer other than its rejection of conservative evangelicalism and its Christendom focus, pioneers of the Emerging Church emphasize that it has resulted or emerged out of missional activity and re-engagement with twenty-first century post-industrial western cultures.<sup>[33]</sup>

### **[edit] Postmodern worldview**

The emerging church movement arose as a response to the perceived influence of modernism in Western Christianity. Just as sociologists noted a cultural shift to postmodern ways of perceiving reality in the late 20th century some Christians also began to advocate changes within the church to respond to these same perceived cultural shifts. These Christians saw the contemporary church as being culturally bound to modernism and contoured their practices to reach a culture that no longer related to some of the common incarnations of Christianity. Emerging Christians began to challenge the 20th-Century church regarding its use of institutional structures, systematic theology, use of propositional teaching methods, a perceived preoccupation with buildings, attractional understanding of mission (trying to bring people into the church rather than improving their world), professional clergy, overemphasis on the facade of goodness and the perceived preoccupation of conservative Christians in the political process.

As a result, the emerging church believes it is necessary to deconstruct modern Christian dogma and avoid the use of jargon, called Christianese, that has become increasingly irrelevant to the prevailing culture. The emerging church accomplishes this by engaging in two-way conversations, or dialogues, rather than proclaim a predigested message and in this way leads people to Jesus through the Holy Spirit on their own terms. Many in the movement embrace the missiology that drives the movement in an effort to be like Christ and make disciples by being a good example. The emerging church movement contains a great diversity in beliefs and practices, although some have adopted a preoccupation with sacred rituals, good works, and political and social activism. Much of the Emerging Church movement have also adopted the approach to evangelism which stressed peer-to-peer dialog rather than dogmatic proclamation and proselytizing, (see conversation section).

## **[edit] Postmodern hermeneutics**

A plurality of Scriptural interpretations is acknowledged in the emerging church movement. Participants in the movement exhibit a particular concern for the effect of the modern *reader's* cultural context on the act of interpretation echoing the ideas of postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish.

## **[edit] Narrative theology**

Narrative explorations of faith, Scripture, and history are emphasized in some emerging churches over exegetical and dogmatic approaches (such as that found in systematic theology and systematic exegesis), which are often viewed as reductionist. Others embrace a multiplicity of approaches.

## **[edit] Generous orthodoxy**

Some leaders in the movement publicly welcome open discussion with other religions regarding the definition of Christian faith.<sup>[34]</sup> Others in the movement label the practice differently, calling the interfaith dialog a means to share their narratives as they learn from the narratives of others.<sup>[35]</sup> Some Emerging Church Christians believe there are radically diverse perspectives within Christianity that are valuable for humanity to progress toward truth and a better resulting relationship with God, and that these different perspectives deserve Christian charity rather than condemnation.<sup>[36]</sup>

Additionally, many participants in the movement assert that dogma has led to the tragic events in history such as the Salem Witch Trials, genocide occurring during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and many other unfortunate events. Recognizing this, many Emerging Christians reject such dogmatism, preferring liberty in Scriptural interpretation on many issues deemed "non-essential".<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## **[edit] Authenticity**

The movement favors the sharing of experiences and interactions such as testimonies, prayer, group recitation, sharing meals and other communal practices, which they believe are personal and sincere over propositional, dogmatic presentation of the Gospel. Teaching in the Emerging Church tends to view the Bible and its stories through a lens which they believe finds significance and meaning for their community's social and personal stories rather than for the purpose of finding cross-cultural, propositional absolutes regarding salvation and conduct.<sup>[37]</sup>

## **[edit] Conversation**

The movement's participants claim they are creating a safe environment for those with opinions ordinarily rejected within modern conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Non-critical, interfaith dialog is favored over dogmatically-driven evangelism in the movement.<sup>[38]</sup> The place of story and narrative replaces the place of

the dogmatic. Therefore the story of the prodigal Son brings more meaning than stating the Ten Commandments.

The relationship between words and images has changed in contemporary culture. In a post-foundational world, it is the power of the image that takes us to the text. The bible is no longer a principal source of morality, functioning as a rulebook. The gradualism of postmodernity has transformed the text into a guide, a source of spirituality, in which the power of the story as but on potential moral reference point has superseded the didactic. Thus the meaning of the Good Samaritan is more important than the Ten Commandments - even assuming that the latter could be remembered in any detail by anyone. Into this milieu the image speaks with power.<sup>[39]</sup>

Those in the movement do not engage in aggressive apologetics or confrontational evangelism in the traditional sense, preferring to allow persons the freedom to discover truth through conversation and relationships with the Christian community.<sup>[40]</sup>

### **[edit] Missional living**

Participants in this movement assert that the incarnation of Christ informs their theology, believing that as God entered the world in human form, adherents enter (individually and communally) into the context around them, aiming to transform that culture through local involvement in it. This holistic involvement may take many forms, including social activism, hospitality, and acts of kindness. This beneficent involvement in culture is part of what is called "*missional living*."<sup>[41]</sup> This approach leads to their focus on temporal and social issues, as opposed to a perceived Evangelical overemphasis on eternal salvation. Drawing on research and models of contextual theology, Mobsby asserts that the Emerging Church is using different models of contextual theology to Conservative Evangelicals. Conservative Evangelical Churches tend to use a 'translation' model of contextual theology<sup>[42]</sup>, (which has been criticised for being colonialist and having a very low opinion of culture and humanity), where the Emerging Church tends to use a 'synthetic' or 'transcendent' model of contextual theology.<sup>[43]</sup> The Emerging Church has charged many Conservative Evangelical Churches of withdrawal from involvement from contextual mission and seeking contextualisation of the gospel.<sup>[44]</sup>

Christian communities must learn to deal with the problems and possibilities posed by life in the "outside" world. But of more importance, any attempt on the part of the church to withdraw from the world would be in effect a denial of its mission.<sup>[45]</sup>

Many Emerging Churches then inadvertently have worked at a strong emphasis on contextualisation and therefore contextual theology. Contextual theology has been defined as:

A way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologising; and social change in that culture.<sup>[46]</sup>

Emerging Churches, draw on this synthetic model or transcendent model of contextual theology, seek to have a high view towards the Bible and the Christian people, as well as having a high view of culture, humanity, and justice. It is this 'both And' approach that makes the difference in contextual theology.<sup>[47][48]</sup>

Emerging communities participate in social action, community involvement, global justice and sacrificial hospitality in an effort to experientially know and share God's saving grace. At a conference titled The Emerging Church Forum in 2006, John Franke said "The Church of Jesus Christ is not the goal of the Gospel, just the instrument of the extension of God's mission". "The Church has been slow to recognize that missions isn't a program the Church administers, it is the very core of the Church's reason for being."<sup>[49]</sup>

This focus on missional living and practising radical hospitality has led many emerging churches to deepen what they are doing by developing a rhythm of life, and a vision of missional loving engagement to the world. Many emerging churches also now see themselves as drawing on new monasticism to express their sense of community and mission, whilst drawing on alternative worship to define their worship.<sup>[50]</sup>

A mixture of emerging Churches, Fresh Expressions of Church and mission initiatives arising out of the charismatic traditions, have begun describing themselves as new monastic communities. They again draw on a combination of the Mystical Communion Model and Sacramental Models, with a core concern to engage with the question of how we should live. The most successful of these have experimented with a combination of churches centred on place and network, with intentional communities, cafes and centres to practice hospitality. Many also have a rhythm, or rule of life to express what it means to be Christian in a postmodern context. ... New Monastic Communities are attempting to relate to a culture of mysticism in a twenty-first century context, modelling expressions of the Christian faith that can relate to this culture.<sup>[51]</sup>