

## IN DEPTH DESCRIPTION OF THE EMERGING CHURCH

### Looking at the emerging church . . .

One of the most fundamental things to understand about the emerging church is that it is very hard to define. There is no “Emerging Church.” It is not a denomination, nor is it a program to be used in congregations. There are a lot of churches in the world that would consider themselves “emerging,” but they all look different from one another. Jonny Baker of Grace in London says, “Church, as we have inherited it, is no longer working for the vast groups of people. The world has changed so much. So I think the term *emerging church* is nothing more than a way of expressing that we need new forms of church that relate to the emerging culture” (Gibbs and Bolger 41).

While there are certain characteristics that emerging churches tend to have and certain characteristic that they don’t have, none of them fit all of these definitions perfectly. To make matters more complicated, there is a lot of debate and variation about what it is that makes a church “emerging.” For this reason, it is important to look at the whole of emerging churches, rather than just individual ones. We know in our own tradition that just because a congregation calls itself a “Lutheran” congregation does not mean that it represents the whole of the Lutheran tradition very well. Likewise, there are many faithful, and some less than faithful, emerging churches and leaders out there, just as there are in any tradition.

The description of the emerging church presented here is long. We fully acknowledge that, and we apologize for that. However, any definition that seeks to provide a concise and precise definition most likely doesn’t quite get at it quite right (not that this answer gets it perfectly right either). Sometimes the best theology requires us to wrestle with things a bit more than we might want to. Thanks for taking the time to read this and learn a bit more along with us.

### What the emerging church is *NOT* . . .

Because there are so many misconceptions about the emerging church circling throughout the church, one of the best places to begin any discussion about it is to talk about what the emerging church is NOT.

As already mentioned, the emerging church is not a denomination. Most emerging churches tend to be non-denominational, though there are a lot of congregations in the mainstream (Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc.) that participate in the emerging conversation and consider themselves as emerging churches. A good example of this would be The Church of the Apostles in Seattle, Washington, which is dually affiliated with the Episcopal Church USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The emerging church is also not a program. There are a lot of programs circulating among churches, each promising to fix some problem or to enhance some ministry. Most of these programs promise to help a church bring more people into it if they follow any number of steps. Emerging churches shy away from programs like this because they believe that what works in one place may not work in another place. For them, being the church is a contextual thing. It

grows out of authentic faithfulness in a particular context. Although emerging churches tend to be growing, their aim is not to grow, but to be faithful. Thus, any church that embraces the emerging church mindset in order to grow has missed the point altogether. Some mainstream congregations talk about adding an “emerging” worship service to their congregation, but even this goes against the emerging mentality. Although the form and style of worship in emerging churches tends to be different than a lot of mainstream churches, that is not what defines it as emerging. Rather than juxtaposing itself against “traditional” worship (as many do with “contemporary” worship), emerging churches embrace a variety of forms (including many traditional ones) in order to develop a more faithful and contextual community.

### **What the emerging church *IS* . . .**

We have spent a lot of time talking about what the emerging church is *not*, so you are probably wondering by now what the emerging church *is*. That is a fair question, but it is a difficult one to answer, and one that needs just a little more prefacing before we can try to answer it. As mentioned earlier, there is no agreement on what defines the emerging church. Part of the reason for that is that most emerging churches embrace the fact that we live in a post-modern world. Like the emerging church, there are a lot of misconceptions about what it means to be post-modern (which we will get into later). For now, it is enough to say that in a post-modern culture, there is a high tolerance for ambiguity. Our tendency to categorize things, to try to pin them down to a 12-point list of attributes is a very modern concept (modern as in the Modern Era, closely tied to the Enlightenment—modern here does not mean “recent times”). Rather than coming up with a specific definition for the emerging church, emerging leaders are happy to live in tensions (as was Martin Luther, who rejected the reasoned explanations of Aquinas, especially when it came to communion and transubstantiation).

One of the best ways to describe emerging churches is as faithful communities who live in dialog. Emerging churches seek to address the difficult issues and to simply talk about faith and converse about the one Holy God who is ultimately indescribable. As they engage in conversation with one another, emerging churches are in dialog with the culture. Rather than seeking to define itself over-and-against culture and rejecting culture, emerging churches acknowledge that faith is incarnational (Jesus became human and lived in the world) and seeks to speak to people through culture without being defined by that culture (because they are defined by God).

For the remainder of our explanation of emerging churches, we turn to Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolder, who in their book, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, describe three core practices and six other marks of emerging churches.

### **Three core practices of emerging churches . . .**

Through their extensive research and evaluation, Gibbs and Bolger have identified three core practices that characterize most every church that would be considered “emerging.” Those practices are: identifying with Jesus, transforming secular space, and living as community.

To say that emerging churches strive to “identify with Jesus” means that they seek to emulate the

“way” that Jesus lived. Although Divine, God chose to live among people, engaging them where they are in the world. Through the incarnation, Jesus engaged the culture and lived in community. For emerging churches, the “way” of Jesus was most clearly articulated in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). For this reason, emerging churches critique theologies that focus only on Jesus’ death and/or resurrection (though still believing his death and resurrection to be an important and necessary part of the incarnation). Some would suggest that Lutherans fit this category of traditions that the emerging church critiques because of Luther’s theology of the cross. However, we believe that a faithful theology of the cross does not devalue Jesus’ life either, but rather puts his life, death, and resurrection all in tension with each other.

The practice of “transforming secular space” is a direct response to the modern era (see our page of definitions for a fuller description of modern and postmodern). Emerging churches believe that the church experienced a fragmentation between religious life and secular life that began developing in the fourteenth century. Although this could easily be seen as a critique of the separation of church and state, that is not what they speak of in relation to this matter. What emerging churches lament is that the life of faith has been separated from daily life. They seek to renew the embodiment of one’s faith and beliefs in all that they do. Although a very minor implication of this practice, one good example of this shift is the separation of “Christian” music from secular music. Emerging Christians believe that even secular music can speak to their faith and their non-Christian compositions can speak to the whole world. In this way, all music becomes sacred music and even secular music that embodies the way of Jesus can speak to Christians. Often times this sacred/secular fragmentation has led to what many people consider the separation of one’s head and heart, suggesting that faith is an emotional thing and the rest of life based on reason. This mentality suggests that faith is mindless and that faith has no real implications for the “real world.”

The third and final core practice of emerging churches is the pursuit of community. Instead of just a group centered around similar interests, emerging churches imagine community at being more like extended family. Relationship is central to any emerging church. It is not just about what “I believe,” and it isn’t all about “me” (often the critique of a lot of contemporary Christian movements). Rather, the life of faith is about “us,” living together, learning together, and loving together, each as Jesus modeled for us. This means that while the worship gathering is still centrally important, living together in the community and with the whole world throughout the week is just as important. As Thomas Merton once wrote, no person is an island.

### **Six other marks of emerging churches . . .**

Although most every “emerging” church exhibits the three core practices described above, they still vary in a lot of ways. Through their research, Gibbs and Bolger have identified an additional six characteristics (in many ways derivatives of the first three) that many emerging churches tend to exhibit, though few of them exhibit all six: welcoming the stranger, serving with generosity, participating as producers, creating as created beings, leading as a body, and merging ancient and contemporary spiritualities.

Several of the additional practices build on following the way of Jesus. This “way” involves a preferential option for the poor (in body, mind, and spirit) that involves not only faith, but an

active response to God's grace through faithful living that welcomes the outcast, hosts the stranger, and challenges the political authorizes by creating an alternative community (Gibbs and Bolger 44). For this reason, emerging churches practice a radical hospitality that seeks to make all people feel welcome in Christ's community, especially those who might be a "stranger" to the church. Most emerging churches attempt to avoid "churchy" language, using more culturally relevant language and metaphors to describe God and God's gracious actions in the world. This radical hospitality also involves serving as Christ commanded the disciples to love and serve one another as Christ himself loves and served them (John 11).

Emerging churches tend to encourage and sometimes even require that people fully participate in the life of the community. This practice comes as a response to the consumer-based church models where people "church shop" to find what meets their needs. Rather than marketing a product, emerging churches invite all people to participate in the community. That means that everyone is involved in some In many emerging churches, the expectations of "members" (few would refer to it as membership) tend to be much higher than in most Lutheran churches. Each person is responsible for contributing to the community through their unique gifts. They are also encouraged to share their experiences, proclaiming the Good News as it has impacted their lives.

Building on the Apostle Paul's already-but-not-yet description of God's action, many Lutherans today are approaching theology from a proleptic viewpoint, believing that God's creative work has not yet been completed and that humans are being drawn into God's creative work of ushering in the Kingdom of God. This trend in theology is also growing in the emerging church conversation. Speaking to life as well as theology, emerging churches see God's redeeming work already happening in this world, but not yet fulfilled (and it won't be until the Kingdom of God fully comes). Rather than developing out own hopes and dreams, our own missions, Christians follow the Divine vision (the *missio Dei*--mission of God) for creation. In this way, God is calling the faithful to become "co-creators" (not that we will be God or nearly as righteous as God). As co-creators obedient to God's vision, we follow the way of Christ and God's will reigns in the world. This also means utilizing our God-given talents and creativity (including the creative means and media that speak to our culture). In this way, all of the faithful become leaders. Emerging churches practice a more "open" leadership in which everyone is encouraged to take responsibility for the mission of the church. Rather than a top-down leadership structure, emerging churches seek to empower all people to use their gifts in ministry.

The final practice that many emerging churches embody is that of merging ancient and contemporary spiritualities. Emerging churches are rediscovering many ancient spiritual practices, such as the church calendar, labyrinth walking, *lectio divina*, and other prayer forms. As they respond to the hyper-activity--the fast-pace, constant activity, and super stimulation--that has come to define our culture, they are finding many of these practices life-giving in ways they never expected. Emerging churches are also rediscovering the power of visual media (like art) to speak to people's spiritual lives. As they rediscover and renew these "ancient" spiritualities, they simultaneously embrace and renew many forms of our culture. Some of these forms are even merged in the use of media, such in projection and on the internet. Although many of these "ancient" spiritual practices might seem given and even mundane to many Lutherans, they are foreign to much of the church. Even such central components to Lutheran tradition as liturgy and the Lord's Supper are beginning to find their way back into the center of many emerging

churches.

### **In conclusion . . .**

As you can see, emerging churches represent a complex movement in the church today. Although there are some isolated emerging churches that embrace a theology or practice that is foreign or even contrary to Lutheran theology, there is much, much more that emerging churches have to offer the Lutheran tradition. Their greatest gifts include the invitation to conversation and their desire to speak of God's gracious love to the whole people throughout God's creation. Lutherans are challenged to engage in this conversation and share our own gifts of theology and tradition so that we together as the Body of Christ might more fully and faithfully follow God's vision for creation.

We invite you to explore the rest of this website, to learn about what leaders in the emerging church and what Lutherans are talking about today. Then please join us in the conversation and in this community so that we might be blessed by the ways that God has gifted you.

### **Works Cited . . .**

Gibbs, Eddie and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.