The Emergent Church

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
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History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

The terms "emergent church" or "emerging church" are sometimes used to describe any new and growing Christian mission congregation or church body. For the purpose of this evaluation, however, the terms emergent or emerging church will be used to describe a loose network of individuals and communities representing many denominations and independent Christian fellowships that are experimenting with new and often nontraditional forms of outreach, teaching, and worship.[1] Emergent theologian Tony Jones defines the emergent church as the "specifically new forms of church life rising from the modern, American church of the twentieth century."[2] The Emergent Village website describes this network as "a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ."[3] This network—often referred to by emergents as a "conversation"—attempts to find more effective ways of witnessing to Christ in contemporary culture and to provide new and culturally appropriate expressions of "church." Related movements include the "simple church" or "organic church" establishment of house churches (it should be noted that in some countries house church meetings may be used to escape persecution) and the trend toward "alternative worship" in England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Europe.

Founder(s):

Although a wide variety of groups and individuals use the term emergent for their work, some of the people listed here were among the first to use the term emergent for themselves and became involved in the founding of the Emergent Village network: Brian McLaren, author and speaker; Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, both of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis; Tim Keel, founding pastor of Jacob's Well Church in Kansas City, Missouri; Chris Seay, pastor and head elder of Ecclesia Church in Houston; Tim Conder, pastor of Emmaus Way in Durham, North Carolina; and Brad Cecil, pastor of Axxess Church of the Pantego Bible Church in Arlington, Texas.

Statistics:

Given the loosely organized nature of the emergent network there can be no firm count of individuals, communities, or interested parties. Scott McKnight, a professor of religious studies at North Park University in Chicago, comments that Barna poll numbers indicate there are between 5 and 20 million Christians in North America who are pursuing alternative forms of spiritual formation. A study by David Barrett and Todd Johnson lists over 111 million Christians

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[1] Some writers distinguish between the two terms, using "emergent" to refer to more doctrinally liberal leaders and communities associated with the Emergent Village and "emerging" as a term for Christian communities that follow a biblically conservative but less traditional church model.
[2] Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), xix.
[3] http://www.emergentvillage.com/.

worldwide without a church as of 2001.[4] Among these Christians there may be over 20,000 independent networks. Emergent communities draw from among these numbers as well as from members of mainline denominations.[5]

History:

In the late 1990s, an association of pastors and church leaders calling itself the Leadership Network hosted conferences and events designed to evangelize the generation known variously as Baby Busters, Gen X, postmodern, or emergent. In May of 2001, six of these leaders (Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Tim Keel, Chris Seay, Tim Conder, and Brad Cecil) discussed in a conference call some possible names for their network. Previous titles included the Young Leaders Network, the Theological Working Group, and the Terranova Project. Learning that forestry experts often study the emerging growth on the forest floor to determine the health of the forest, the group settled on the word "emergent" to describe themselves.[6] Dan Kimball, an author and pastor associated with the network, explained the new title: "For me, the term 'the emerging church' simply meant churches who were focusing on the mission of Jesus and thinking about the Kingdom in our emerging culture. It meant churches who were 'being the church' instead of 'going to church' in our emerging culture."[7]

The Emergent Village website provides a point of contact for the emerging church movement or "conversation." Other contacts and sources of information for the emergent network include conferences and events sponsored by the Emergent Village, churches such as Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis or Jacob's Well in Kansas City, books and articles by authors such as Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Frank Viola, Stanley Grenz, N. T. Wright, and Leonard Sweet, and individual and community websites.

In 2008 the Board of Directors (or Village Council) of Emergent Village posted a letter on the website concerning planned changes in leadership and direction for the Village network. According to the letter the Emergent Village "is a 501(c) (3) organization that seeks to serve the generative friendship called emergent," as well as "a grass-roots relational network."[8] In order to decentralize and reduce expenses, the Board decided to discontinue the role of National Coordinator (held at that time by Tony Jones). The Emergent Village hoped to encourage the development of "neighborhoods" such as Anglimergents, Presbymergents, Luthermergents, and so on. Village blogs and conferences serve as a "village green" for interaction and discussion among the various "neighborhoods" associated with the network. There are four values that serve as "city limits" for the Village: (1) commitment to God in the way of Jesus, (2) commitment to the Church in all its forms, (3) commitment to God's world, and (4) commitment to one another.[9]

As the emergent conversation continued to develop, individuals and communities once associated with the Emergent Village network began to break away and form different networks.

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[4] Report by Dr. David Barrett and Todd Johnson, *State of Christianity 2001*, available at http://www.jesus.org.uk/dawn/2001/dawn07.html. The number is predicted to be over 125 million by the year 2025.
[5] Scott McKnight, blog "Forgotten Missional Ways 3" at http://blog.beliefnet.com/jesuscreed/2007/02/forgotten-missional-ways-3.html
[6] Jones, *The New Christians*, xvii–xviii.
[7] www./dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04origin_of_the_t.html
[8] http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/a-letter-from-the-board-to-friends-of-emergent-village .
[9] http://www.emergentvillage.org/about-information/values-and-practices

Some of these individuals were dissatisfied with what they considered to be the liberal theology of many emergents, preferring to hold a more biblically conservative faith while at the same time pursuing new trends in outreach to the unchurched. Former emergents include Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill church in Seattle and Dan Kimball and Scott McKnight of the Origins network"[10]

Texts:

There are many books discussing the wide variety of emergent beliefs. These include Tony Jones, *The New Christians* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Ray S.Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); and Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010). Emergents (as well as those opposed to their teachings and practices) also make wide use of online networks and blogs.

Beliefs and Practices:

A verse often mentioned in emergent writing is Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It is a verse that serves as a theme and shapes the first of the Emergent Village values as "the way of Jesus." Another Village value is a commitment to the church in all its forms, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. Emergents do not want to be elitist or critical but rather inclusive, recognizing that there are weaknesses and strengths in all denominations. They are committed to what they call "a generous orthodoxy." Emergents are encouraged to put their faith into action in the world, seeking peace, justice, and the healing of creation. They hope to encourage and learn from others in continuing conversation.

Values similar to those of the Emergent Village are expressed by many people associated with the emerging church. Emergents welcome plurality and as a result their writings and websites present a wide variety of opinions. It is possible, however, to find a number of common threads within the emergent conversation. This evaluation will consider five aspects of emergent belief and practice: (1) a disdain for or distrust of the institutional (orthodox) church, (2) a selective view of continuity with church history, (3) the celebration of plurality, (4) a desire to work for peace and justice on earth and, (5) the need to "be church" out in the world, expressing the Gospel in ways that can be understood within the contemporary culture.

Emergents express the desire to distance themselves from the church in its present institutional forms. Although they affirm their belief in the Trinitarian faith and the historic Christian creeds, they do not accept what they refer to as the doctrinal "gatekeeping" of denominations. Doctrinal statements are thought to determine which people may or may not be included in church membership or in salvation, decisions emergents believe are best left to God. It is believed that the desire for certain correct points of view, like those presented in doctrinal statements, have been used historically to oppress and marginalize those with different ideas. Imposed doctrinal

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[10] Mark Driscoll teaches that certain doctrines such as the Trinity, Jesus' atonement, and Scripture as God's inerrant Word belong "in a closed hand." Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Practically Theological," *Christianity Today* (March 2010):29. Much emergent theology is temporary and shaped in local conversation and so carried in an "open hand." The Origins website is www.originsproject.org .

frameworks are thought to make the Christian faith unattractive to those outside the faith. Faith is thought of as a "journey," and as a result questions and uncertainty are seen as marks of humility while certainty and assurance are not highly valued.[11] Emergent theologian Tony Jones comments, "In the end, the new definition of 'Christian' may not be what particular doctrines one believes or which flavor of church to which one belongs but whether (and how thoroughly) one is woven into the fabric of global Christianity."[12]

Related to this distrust of institutions and denominations is the emergents' selective view of their continuity with historic Christendom. Emergents compare their work in contemporary culture to the mission of first-century Christians, but prefer to trace their descent from the apostle Paul and the "church of Antioch" rather than the "church of Jerusalem." Antioch represents mission-minded outreach, while Jerusalem represents institutional religion and centralized authority.[13] Emergents believe that the twenty-first century church has been damaged by modern, colonial, and imperial "viruses." They also believe that the Christian faith was infected by Greco-Roman culture, especially during the fourth century reign of Emperor Constantine. Speaking of the church's leadership, Frank Viola writes, "Greco-Roman culture was hierarchical by nature. This influence seeped into the church when new converts brought their cultural baggage into the believing community."[14] In her discussion of the emerging church, author Phyllis Tickle comments on changes she believes took place in Christianity during the era of Constantine: "The whole purpose of 'salvation' began to shift from a means of effecting or living out God's will on earth to being a ticket for transplantation into a paradisial hereafter."[15] Political and cultural influences are generally thought to have damaged or changed the faith as originally taught by Jesus, His disciples, and Christians in the first three centuries of the church.

A third aspect of emergent belief and practice is a willingness to accept and celebrate plurality in belief and in the interpretation of Scripture. Since the original "meta-narrative" of salvation history is thought to have been damaged over time and contemporary, postmodern culture in any case distrusts the idea of a single grand narrative, emergents value the "personal narrative" of the individual Christian. The emerging church network is often thought of as a conversation and so plurality, even a plurality of truth or belief, is expected and desirable as many voices contribute to the conversation. Scripture also participates in conversation with believers and the presumed work of the Holy Spirit in contemporary culture is viewed as "a text to be read alongside" the biblical text.[16] Frank Viola reflects this conversational approach with his belief that "the present-day pastoral role hinders the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose. Why? Because that purpose is

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[11] Tony Jones writes, "'I'm humble,' an emergent might tell you, 'because I don't know what I'm wrong about today. I'll speak with confidence, and I'll speak with passion, but I won't speak with certainty.'" Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 140.
[12] Jones, 57.
[13] For comparisons between Antioch and Jerusalem, see Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006) and Doug Pagitt, "The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology," in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).
[14] Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, Ill.: BarnaBooks, 2008), 117.
[15] Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 161. Apparently absent from Tickle's arguments is a God who intervenes in human history and guides His Church, a point of view also reflected in the emergents' selective view of church history.
[16] Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 129. Anderson uses the ordination of women as an example of the Spirit's work, a practice to be read as a contemporary text alongside Scripture.

centered on making Christ's headship visibly manifested in the church through the free, open, mutually participatory, every-member functioning of the body."[17]

A fourth thread in the emergent conversation is the desire to work for peace and justice in the world and for the renewal of the earth. The healing miracles of Jesus provide an example of caring for people's physical, as well as spiritual, needs. Christians should work for justice, healing, and the renewal of the earth in anticipation of the new creation to come. One's lifestyle—especially a lifestyle following the example of Jesus and His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount—is often thought to be more important than one's beliefs. Jesus Himself is viewed as the Savior but also as a revolutionary figure who opposed the hierarchical traditions of His culture and the violent, oppressive ways of the Roman empire. In His death on the cross Jesus identifies with those who suffer.

Hoping to reach the unchurched, emergents often seek ways to provide what they consider to be authentic spiritual experiences in worship. This approach to "vintage" worship may make use of candles and stained glass or incorporate art, poetry, and meditation. Understanding that many people may have no wish to enter any church building or experience any form of worship, emergents believe that it is important for Christians to go out into the world to reach the unchurched rather than simply hoping unbelievers will come to them. Emergents want to be culturally relevant and present the Good News in ways that will be understood and received in the contemporary, postmodern culture. Some emergents believe that the Christian faith does not change, but they believe that the way the faith is culturally expressed must change. The proclamation and demonstration of the Christian faith in the postmodern culture is compared to the way in which foreign missionaries present the Gospel in a culture different than their own.

A Lutheran Response

Although emergents express a dislike for the gatekeeping doctrinal statements of the institutional church, they apparently recognize that the establishment of certain boundaries is necessary (and impossible to avoid) where beliefs and practices are concerned. The Emergent Village website lists as its "city limits" the four values mentioned earlier in this evaluation: (1) commitment to God in the way of Jesus, (2) commitment to the Church in all its forms, (3) commitment to God's world, and (4) commitment to one another. As a "village" they want to "create and defend safe space in which people can have needed contact and conversation."[18] In an effort to foster religious agreement, the sixteenth century Emperor Charles V attempted to create his own "safe space" for discussion. He summoned the Lutheran princes of his German territories to present a statement of their beliefs at Augsburg in 1530. In response to the emperor's summons, the doctrinal statements of the Lutherans' Augsburg Confession were designed to provide an arena for confession and discussion, so that "the opinions and positions of the parties among us would be heard, understood, and considered, charitably, amicably, and with mutual graciousness. In this way, by correcting whatever has been treated differently in the writings of both parties, everything could be brought together and returned to one single truth and to Christian concord."[19]

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[17] Viola and Barna, 137.
[18] http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/a-letter-from-the-board-to-friends-of-emergent-village.
[19] Preface to the Augsburg Confession, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 31.

The apostle Paul wrote about unity in his letter to the Christians in Corinth: "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). Disagreements were present, however, and later in the same letter the apostle acknowledged the role played by divisions among the believers. In the presence of falsehood truth was more clearly recognized: "For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized" (1 Corinthians 11:18–19).

The presence of denominations within Christianity reflects the divisions among those who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. The doctrinal statements of denominations provide an arena for discussion and the means to search for possible areas of agreement. But the presence of division does not mean the absence of doctrinal truth. A variety of opinions and teachings may be expressed in writing or in conversation, but some of those ideas will be true and others false. Paul told Timothy, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1:13–14). There is a deposit of truth that God has entrusted to His people. And, however unpopular the idea may be to contemporary culture, a certain amount of doctrinal gatekeeping will be involved where that truth is confessed and taught. The Formula of Concord states, "Fundamental, enduring unity in the church requires above all else a clear and binding summary and form in which a general summary of teaching is drawn together from God's Word, to which the churches that hold the true Christian religion confess their adherence."[20]

Emergents express a desire to separate themselves from certain aspects of Christian history. They do not want to repeat, and rightly so, the oppressive or unChristlike behaviors of which Christians have been guilty in the past. Yet contemporary culture, even apart from Christian thought, often wants to disregard the past, and in so doing loses its foundation for the present. As we learn from things wrongly done or celebrate centuries of faithful life and teaching, the Church of the past shapes our witness as the Church today. The Christian faith is rooted in the mighty acts of God who works within human history and who Himself stepped into that history in the Person of Jesus Christ. Scripture places the birth of Jesus squarely in the reign of Caesar Augustus, when "Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:1–2). The Apostles' Creed reminds us that Jesus "was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate." History will come to an end, because God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). History teaches us that some ideas found in the emergent conversation have been suggested before and rightly discarded. The witness of history shows us that the Church may safely accept and adopt, within the faithful witness of Scripture, what is new and right and firmly reject, according to that same Word, what is wrong. The traditions and authority of the Jerusalem church are as much a part of Christian history as the work of missionaries sent out from Antioch. Greco-Roman culture shaped the way in which the true faith was expressed, as did the doctrinal debates of the sixteenth century. The Holy Spirit has been at work through the centuries, within history, watching over the deposit of faithful teaching and "the pattern of sound words" that He entrusted to the Church.

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[20] *Book of* Concord, 526.

Related to the emergent dislike of doctrinal statements is the value placed on plurality. Emergents believe that the grand narrative of salvation history, damaged over the centuries and distrusted by contemporary culture, must be "reframed." In view of this distrust, emergents value instead personal witness or one's personal story. More damaging is the fact that the reframing allows the story of salvation to be changed according to the desires and interests of contemporary culture. It is true that the story of salvation can be expressed in many different ways. We might talk about Christ and His work in terms of the kinsman-redeemer from the book of Ruth, the suffering servant of Isaiah, or the Good Shepherd, Christ's own description from John's Gospel. Various narratives might be used by the Holy Spirit to touch the lives of different individuals with the truth of the Gospel, yet the story of Christ and His redeeming death does not change. It is false and misleading to think that the Church's message must be uncertain and plural in nature simply because contemporary society distrusts the idea of a single "meta-narrative." Holy Scripture, and not the changing whims of culture, provides the Church with its source of authority. As the Lutheran Confessions state, "the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone."[21]

As mentioned above, emergents often use Micah 6:8 as a theme for the Christian life, a life of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Christians must be the Body of Christ in the world, speaking out against evil, reaching out in compassion to people who have been harmed by illness, war, poverty, or injustice, and setting an example in caring for God's creation. These are areas in which the emergent networks work hard to follow the example of Jesus Christ, showing His love to a world in need. The use of Micah 6:8 as a theme, however, might also include the previous verse, which asks, "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" However great our good works on behalf of others, we cannot earn forgiveness and eternal life for them or for ourselves. The Emergent Village value of "commitment to God in the way of Jesus" cannot in any way compare to God's commitment to our salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus was not simply a revolutionary figure who died to identify with those who suffer. Jesus, God's only Son and Mary's firstborn, came to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. In all acts of mercy, in all work for justice done in the name of Christ, the good news of His death and resurrection must never be overlooked or omitted.

In some emergent circles, the Christian message has been so altered that little, if anything remains of the saving Gospel or of any stated need for it. The narrative of the fall, God's wrath against sin, and Christ's sacrifice is rewritten into a form more acceptable to the culture.[22] Emergents do, however, emphasize the importance of being church in the world, not only in terms of helping those in need but also in reaching out to unbelievers. They make every effort to understand and respond to the worldviews expressed within contemporary culture, attempting to answer the questions of unbelievers and provide a strong witness to Christ. With the true and unchanging biblical narrative of sin and salvation in hand, we might do well to follow the emergent example of witness in the world. Many people will come to our churches looking for a place of worship, but many more people will not come to us. They may simply feel no need to

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[21] *The* Book *of Concord*, 486.

[22] Emergent author Brian McLaren believes that the fall, redemption, justification, and eternity do not have a place in a correct biblical narrative. Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 35.

attend church and may not see any point in doing so, or they may attempt to satisfy their spiritual needs on their own, quite apart from the worship and programs of the institutional church. To reach these people, we in the church must go to them and find points of contact with them, speaking of our Christian faith "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15), so that they will come to share the hope and forgiveness that can only be found in Jesus Christ.

Emergents believe that the message of the Church was shaped and rewritten by fourth century politics and by Enlightenment modernity. The message of the Church is not a product of Constantine's politics or Enlightenment thought but of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. It is true that we live in a postmodern culture distrustful of grand narratives and eager for plural and inclusive teachings. But as Christians we have been born again into a different culture, the culture of Jesus Christ, who "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Our Christian life and witness do not emerge from supposedly outdated institutions but from the waters of Holy Baptism. As a result, ours is an "emerging church" worldview shaped not by postmodern culture but by faith in Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the faithful witness of the Church through the centuries. It is a worldview that we, as Lutherans, have to share with the world.

For Further Reading

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Links and Websites

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