

“The Shaping of Things to Come?”

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They have evocative names: Mosaic, The Journey, NewSong, Fluid, Solomon’s Porch, Scum of the Earth, The River, Meeting House, Compass, Upper Room, Healing Place, Mars Hill, Celebration, Potter’s Field, and Crossover—to name just a few. They may be smaller and larger communities of people—most followers of Christ, but many participating because they are curious or hungry for something that they cannot name—trying to figure out what it means to be people of faith at a time when they feel that both the culture and the traditional church have largely failed them. They are young and old—but mostly younger, with leadership that has not yet reached 40 years of age. Their theology is generally biblically-based, but open and evolving. They shun old distinctions such as “liberal” or “conservative,” as well as other more classical theological labels. They gather in living rooms, warehouses, theaters, church buildings (as often in church basements and fellowship halls as in sanctuaries), and storefronts. Worship practices are similarly diverse, ranging from ancient liturgy to high-tech experiments of visual pyrotechnics and fusion jazz. Most embrace a wide array of both the arts and popular culture, as well as technology in all its emerging forms.¹ The gatherings are frequently ethnically diverse. Leaders are very articulate about their distinctive visions of the church and their philosophies of ministry. And almost uniformly they claim God’s manifold mission in the world as their own.

These recent experiments in “being church” are innovative, bold, diverse, sometimes irreverent, definitely non-traditional, culturally and technologically savvy, and often feel threatening to churches as we know them.

The fact is that all church congregations in North America are now doing ministry in a radically different culture. Yet most churches continue to act as if nothing has changed in decades. Sure, in traditional churches we occasionally update our programs: we add a worship service with a different style of music and call it “contemporary”, we change our logos, we write new purpose statements, we add technology, we appoint younger members to our committees and governing boards and we change our governing structures. Sometimes we even go to a seminar sponsored by some new wave of younger, more aggressive, highly creative expressions of “church” and ponder whether such radical changes are necessary. Often we settle for a few new strategies hoping to energize our flagging momentum. But nothing has basically changed in the ways in which we conceptualize “church.” We still think largely in terms of programs to attract, buildings to house, organizational structures and budgets to support, and leaders to guide.

At the same time, there is a gnawing suspicion in most mainline churches, supported by the plummeting attendance and the uncomfortable sense that the church is being pushed to the margins of our society, that the old ways aren’t working very well anymore.² Even Evangelicals, who recently have achieved unprecedented recognition and power are also being pushed to the margins. Historic Pentecostal denominations, if the 100th anniversary celebrations of the Azusa Street Awakenings are any indication, are looking backward rather than forward for inspiration. And many of the megachurches spawned in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s have plateaued.

So over the past decade or so, startling new ways of thinking about and doing “church” have begun to appear. At first, veteran observers simply tried to understand and to classify these new expressions within more traditional categories. Were they predominantly liturgical, charismatic, evangelical, Reformed, etc.? But the old categorizations no longer work very well. After all, even traditional church attendees have little interest in old theological distinctives. Even the broad categories of theological “liberal” and “conservative” have morphed into what some are calling “post-liberal” and “post-conservative” expressions of faith. We are now apparently living in the postmodern, post-denominational, post-Christendom age.

What soon becomes clear is that many of these new “churches” represent new paradigms of church life altogether. Some are driven by the changes in the culture. They are “postmodern” and/or fully immersed in the pop cultures of the day. Others are driven by distinctive, clearly defined ministry philosophies. And still others relate primarily to missional concerns. These “churches” identify themselves with adjectives such as seeker-friendly, emergent, missional, multicultural, organic, fluid, satellite, incarnational, cell, virtual, holistic, newly monastic, immigrant, come-as-you-are—and much more. Many have taken shape independently, but others are linked together—not in traditional denominational structures, but in relational, conversational and missional networks which defy older theological or ecclesiastical categories.

To be sure, ecclesial experiments have occurred regularly throughout church history. Often there have been movements, such as the “radical reformers” during the time of the Reformation, who were trying to recapture a more primitive or “biblical” form of the church. That is one impetus within these new church expressions as well.

But the fact that there are so many of these experiments going on today and that they are growing (often quickly) while traditional church denominations are barely holding their own, is creating headlines. Major Christian publications, such as *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century* are now regularly publishing articles profiling some of these experiments.³

What is driving the proliferation of these new experiments in “church”?

Because the church always exists within a cultural context, the shape of the church throughout history has been both a reflection of and a reaction to the prevailing culture. The ancient church took on many of the trappings (both in form and content) of the Greco-Roman world. The culture had a major role in shaping the life of the Christian community from its calendar to its liturgy. The medieval church reflected the authoritarian nature of that highly stratified culture and became an institution whose primary characteristic was dominion in both architecture and function. In the renaissance and Reformation periods, the church embodied the chaos of the tectonic culture shifts in the understanding of the place of humanity in the cosmos. This was an age of sweeping new dialog and rapid transition, not unlike our own. In the Enlightenment, churches often became lecture halls where preaching became predominant over sacrament, and where there was both a strong response in philosophical apologetics and in experiential piety. Following the industrial revolution, churches focused self-consciously on technique, new measures of success, leadership development and broader activism both in evangelism and social concern (though these latter were characteristically owned by the fundamentalist and modernist wings of the church respectively). And in our more

recent information and entertainment age, churches have become more like theaters in style and consumerists in attitudes.

Of course, these are wild generalizations, but the point is that broad cultural transitions do drive change in the responses of the faith community. And today we are in a time of rapid change. Consider for example:

- 1) American life is more and more fragmented. While at one time we could talk about a singular “American” culture, we now are experiencing multiple cultures commingling but not melding. This is being driven by changing demographics (ethnic diversification; greatly expanding populations at the oldest and youngest ends of the age spectrum; and widening economic stratification), as well as by a rapidly expanding religious pluralism with greater and greater numbers of people actively identifying themselves as “spiritual” but not Christian. We are also increasingly a mobile society which challenges any institutional life based on relative community stability. At the same time this very fragmentation has spurred a hunger for community.
- 2) Increasingly “postmodern” characteristics underlie prevailing cultural values. These characteristics include a worldview where relativism trumps absolutism, where individual experience trumps rationalism, and where utilitarian pragmatism rather than religious values drives moral and social ethics.
- 3) Technological change is pervasive. From cellphones to email to podcasts to ever more advanced “digital” information and entertainment systems, our culture is being flooded with new technological applications which are affecting all of our human encounters. For the rising generations, computer-driven technology has

- become an extension of everyday life. Instantaneous “connectivity” is expected and the building and sustaining of community becomes more dependent on technological applications at all levels from the relation of parents and children to the real-time audience participation in nationwide entertainment broadcasts.
- 4) All of this coincides with and has fueled the end of “Christendom” in the West. Since the 4th century C.E., the Church has dominated the intellectual, social, artistic and political life of western culture and has had a privileged place in society. As such, churches largely focused on institution building and maintenance. Even the word “church” has come to be equated with buildings, programs, organizational structures and leadership hierarchies. People have typically viewed individual churches as social clubs and sometimes social-service agencies; have hired pastors to be chaplains, teachers, therapists, and (in large churches) corporate executives; have worried a lot about internal ecclesial strife; and have been driven to produce worship and other programs which are attractive to an increasingly consumerist population who want comfort food worship and personal help in coping with their increasingly complex lives. But today, there are lots of other acceptable options readily available in the culture to address many of these needs. So the church is being pushed to the margins. Yes, the church still has influence—but it is more and more viewed as a worn out or a corrupt institution that is simply one voice among many in the culture, and not a dominant one at that.

New ways of following Jesus?

So, in this rapidly changing cultural kaleidoscope these new experiments have emerged, exploring what it means to be followers of Jesus. Many of the leaders of these experiments do not come from existing churches, but from totally outside the experience of traditional church structures.⁴ Others have long since consciously abandoned their ecclesial roots because of disillusionment with the institutions, rejection of the dogma, or simple boredom with the religious forms and rituals.⁵ But along the way, they have nevertheless discovered Jesus—or more broadly, they have newly discovered a relationship with the Triune God of the Bible.

Based on what most describe as very experiential beginnings, these leaders have tried to discover what it means to follow Christ, to engage with the missional God, and to enter the life of the Spirit with as little ecclesiastical baggage as possible. They have frequently tried to construct an understanding of their faith from the ground up, often without the aid of (or, some would say, without hindrance of) the long tradition of the Church. Critics of these new experiments frequently point out the obvious dangers of failing to listen to the voices of 2000 years of wisdom, and the consequent susceptibility to repeating the heresies of the past.⁶ But those on the new journey counter that there will be time enough for correction as they continue in their discipleship, and that their real motivation is to simply be “a new kind of Christian.”⁷

As people with a keen awareness of contemporary popular culture, these recent Christian pilgrims have very consciously entered into “boundary time and space”—into a rapidly changing world in which the “old” is passing away, but the “new” is only just budding. For them, everything is up for grabs. Tony Jones, national director of Emergent, is typical in his comment: “So, we’ve all got some things to figure out right

now, including what we can really know and the certainly with which we can state our claims in a pluralistic society.”⁸

This willingness to journey to the edges of both church and culture is not pursued without a strong sense of both God’s support and a solid commitment to the Bible as authority. While these pioneers grapple openly with interpretive problems, they consistently argue their issues from the pages of Scripture. The centrality of the Bible in these otherwise diverse expressions of faith has led some commentators to characterize them as offshoots of the Evangelical movement. But many Evangelicals find these experiments as hard to understand or to identify with as do the more liberal wings of the church for whom this sort of commitment to Biblical authority seems tradition bound.

Another strong characteristic of these experiments is that they are communitarian. They emphasize the importance of the fellowship they share and they lean into their relationships fervently and sacrificially. “See these disciples how they love one another!” is an attractive reality for people who have experienced relational chaos and or feelings of rejection, or who see the world as increasingly in need of reconciling love.

As self-conscious as these new communities are, the great majority do not see their primary goal as self-establishment or self-perpetuation. Their vision of God’s people is that we are to be missional and transformational in the world. They take seriously Jesus’ commission to the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” (John 20.21) They tend to play down organizational structures, buildings, budgets and even leadership patterns as unfortunate distractions to what God is calling the church to be.

When they think about what it is that God wants people to do in the world, they look first to what they see God doing throughout history. God seeks, speaks, reconciles, heals, judges, forgives, feeds, leads, calls, and does justice. And God “shows up”—eventually incarnated in the person of Jesus to usher in a new age beginning now in the hearts of his followers and ultimately to be fulfilled in the coming Kingdom. Most of these new experiments see themselves as incarnational communities involved with Christ in holistic ministries both near and far. Old views of programmatic “missions” are rejected, as are various “reductions” of the Gospel into categories such as “proclamation” or “social action.”

In describing these new groups, I have intentionally tried to avoid the word “church,” not because many of these experiments would not refer to themselves as churches, nor because there is any theological reason to deny them this characterization. But these groups use the word “church” in a very different way than our culturally established references where “church” commonly refers to a building, a program, or an institutional structure. In these new communities, “church” reclaims the more biblical meaning of “gathering” and refers primarily to the people. Often they refer to their meeting place as simply another ministry environment—only one place where God’s people (the church) are called to love and to serve.

It is my view that these new ecclesial experiments—even in their diversity of practice, their theological flailing, and their unsettling irreverence—should be viewed as a prophetic movement both to our culture and to our traditional ecclesiastical expressions. We need to listen, to watch, to learn. This is a growing movement. Many unchurched people, who have never had significant interaction with God’s people, are experiencing a

new and vital relationship with Jesus Christ. While some practices may seem faddish, these experiments are not going away. They are touching on deep truths and are calling all of us to a reexamination of our traditions in light of both the new realities of the culture and the biblical mandates of the Gospel. Here are people eager to tell the old, old story in a new, new culture. And the old, old church needs to pay attention, not merely to the obviously changing styles and tastes, but to the deeper ecclesial, theological and missional currents. God may be speaking a fresh word and doing a new thing.

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. Some observers of these new ecclesial experiments think that the changes are largely about style and preference. In what ways do you find this an accurate or inaccurate assessment?
2. For whom would faith communities of this new sort be most attractive?
3. What aspects of these new experiments are likely to be faddish—and which might have enduring consequences?
4. What characteristics of traditional church life do you think need to be reevaluated in light of current culture?

Suggestions for further reading:

The following books explore only a few of the dimensions of the new experiments in contemporary church life.

George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary*, Tyndale House, 2005.

James B. Browson, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey, Charles C. West, *StormFront: The Good News of God*, Eerdmans, 2003.

D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, Zondervan, 2005.

Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, Zondervan, 2006.

Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation: Reaching Out without Selling Out*, Zondervan, 2004.

Eddie Gibbs, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, Baker Academic, 2005.

Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, Hendrickson, 2006.

Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post-Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN*, Zondervan, 2004.

Reggie McNeal, *Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith*, Zondervan, 2005.

Andy Stanley, *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry*, Multnomah, 2004.

Steve Taylor, *The Out of Bounds Church?: Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change*, Zondervan, 2005.

¹ Many not only have an internet presence, but multi-site video venues, film/media production facility, podcasts and vodcasts, church blogs, and lots of communication, music and lighting wizardry in their worship spaces.

² One has only to look at the statistics in the *2007 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* [<http://www.nccusa.org/news/070305yearbook2007.html>] to get a feel for the relative stagnation of churches in North America which are increasing as a whole at a very modest rate of less than 1% and in many mainline denominations are falling precipitously. The PC(USA), for example, lost 2.84% in membership last year alone.

³ See for example the cover articles “Emergent Church: A Visit to Jacob’s Well” in *The Christian Century*, 9/16/06; “America’s Most Innovative Churches” in *Outreach*, Jan/Feb 2007; “Going Missional: Break free of the box and touch your world”, in *Leadership*, Winter 2007; etc. Numerous articles about this phenomenon are also appearing regularly in the secular media, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Atlantic Monthly*, etc.

⁴ Doug Pagitt, leader of Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis and a prime mover in the so-called “emergent dialog” is a good example. Doug reports that he came out of no church background at all. Cf. *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A week in the life of an experimental church* (2004).

⁵ Reading the books and blogs of these leaders can provide interesting insight into both the genesis of these new Christian movements and into the cultural and ecclesial disillusionment which have fueled their quests.

⁶ See, for example, R. Scott Smith, *Truth & the New Kind of Christian* (2005) and D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (2005).

⁷ Brian McLaren takes his readers on just such a journey in his narrative trilogy: *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (2003), and *The Last Word and the Word After That* (2005). Bruxy Cavey, pastor of The Meeting House, a multi-site community in the greater Toronto area, also typifies the journey in *The End of Religion: an introduction to the subversive spirituality of Jesus* (2005).

⁸ From a book endorsement by Tony Jones of R. Scott Smith's rather critical assessment of the Jones' movement.