



What Leaders Need to Know about the Emerging Church

By Susan Cox-Johnson

It was only a few years ago that I first heard of “The Emerging Church.” I encountered the literature of the emerging church in an evangelism class, and it immediately resonated with me. At that time, I was serving Broadway United Methodist Church located in Kansas City. Once one of the largest United Methodist churches in western Missouri, Broadway was trying to feel its way into the 21st Century, trying to connect with the many young adults living in its not-quite-urban/not-quite-suburban neighborhood. What authors like Brian McLaren, Stanley Grenz, and Robert Webber had to say rang true. About that same time, I began worshipping at “Jacob’s Well” on Sunday evenings and experienced incredible energy among the many young adults attending there. The pastor, Tim Keel, is a member of the coordinating body of Emergent Village.

Since then, I have felt a profound call to direct my ministry toward younger adults. I have become deeply involved in this “conversation” – with a variety of dialogue groups and in the blogosphere. I have learned some of the characteristics of the emerging church and some of the challenges congregations and denominations face in understanding and embracing these new expressions of faith.

A postmodern world. The emerging church takes seriously the fact that the world has changed. Peter Drucker says that every few hundred years in Western history, there occurs a sharp transformation. “Within a few short decades,” he writes, “society rearranges itself – its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institution.” Decades later, younger people cannot even imagine the world as it was before. Drucker feels such a time of transformation is upon us.

The name given to this cultural phenomenon is postmodernity, which is characterized by skepticism about the objective nature of knowledge and truth. Standard categories, definitions, and expectations are losing their authority. The “meta-narratives” that helped us make sense of our lives, such as Horatio Alger’s “rags to riches” stories, no longer ring true.

Blurred theological categories. In a postmodern world, it is not so easy to categorize people theologically. Not all emerging churches are the same. Some are very conservative – some, not. You might see someone who says he is an evangelical wearing a pin indicating that he stands in solidarity with gays and lesbians. Or you may see a young woman who works for Planned Parenthood reading a book by an evangelical author.



Relational evangelism. Communities of faith emerging out of this culture are not driven by large programming initiatives, but by relationships between individuals and within small groups. In the last century, the standard pathway of church affiliation was behave, believe, then belong. You bought into the values of a church by meeting the standards of that particular community, then you came to believe and made a statement of faith, and then you belonged. In today's world, where people yearn so much for the "real," the paradigm has become belong, believe, then behave. You become a part of a group, you come to believe in the reality of the risen Christ, and then the way you live your life changes.

Ancient-future orientation. The emerging church communities have taken on what Robert Webber calls the "ancient-future" orientation. Worship shows a pre-modern preference for practices that celebrate the mystery of God, such as iconography, sensory elements like candles and incense, and experiencing the sacrament of Holy Communion weekly. These old practices are made to come alive in very authentic ways through the use of technology and popular media. Very traditional hymns, for example, are made new with original arrangements and contemporary instrumentation.

New leadership challenges. How can churches and denominations connect with this emerging world? New leaders need to be adept at listening and responding to the emerging generation. Leaders need to be able to respond creatively and authentically to a changing context. Creative young thinkers in tune with emerging postmodern culture often find our church culture frustrating and our institutions discouraging. Many turn to other denominations or independent churches. We are called to listen, respect, and not dismiss those who have the courage to minister creatively in the midst of change. And we should ask questions of ourselves and of our institutions:

- How well are seminaries responding to the shifting cultural landscape – not only in the content of their curricula, but also in the methodologies they model and teach? Are generational studies, popular culture, and technology being lifted up as subjects for study?
- Are the requirements we place on persons coming for ordination truly the right ones for those who will minister in the midst of changing cultural realities? How can the leaders who have emerged spontaneously from organic, new faith communities be encouraged and authenticated?
- Do current church planting models work well in fostering the growth of emergent faith communities? How can the "hands-on" mission paradigm of emerging faith communities fit into denominational structures that require funding to maintain cooperative ministry?
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A good starting point is listening to younger adults in and outside the church, and becoming their advocates. Then we should pray for ways to make the emerging conversation a source of renewal for the church.

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