



An Anglican / Emerging Church Synthesis?

by Leslie Nipps



Over the last year or so, I have found my calling as a Christian and as a missional priest renewed by my association with what is broadly called 'the emerging church.' My invigorating encounter with and participation in the life of emerging churches has led to me to think imaginatively about what the model and theology of the emerging church might have to offer Anglicanism in America, which is explicitly facing a crisis in mission.

What is the emerging church?

The emerging church is a moving target, a current and ongoing expression of American culture; ask ten different practitioners, and you will get ten different definitions. I often tell people to google "emerging church" and see what you get, rather than put me, or anyone, in the impossible position of trying to define it. That is how I started, and it was better than any attempt to define it I have yet seen.

Instead of a formal definition, then, here are what I consider six core characteristics of emerging churches:

- **They want to recover the sense of "Being Church" rather than "Going to Church."** The emerging church grounds itself in shared discipleship in Christ. They seek to be communities of learning, service, prayer, spiritual growth and worship. Despite, in most instances, being from evangelical backgrounds, they are mining the rich traditions of Christianity to seek growth, commitment, and community as followers of Jesus. They seek to be intentional Christian communities which welcome the unchurched, but are not, in the old sense, "seeker sensitive"; they do not water down Christian practice, doctrine, or worship to attract the unchurched. They often have no buildings, instead meeting in homes, or other

locations (see below). When they do have buildings, they try hard to see them as functional expressions of Christian ministry, always seeking out ways to be Church outside of formal parish structures (like small house groups).

- **They seek to "go out" to where the unchurched are, rather than "invite them in."** Parishes in pubs, bars and homeless encampments are typical. They plant themselves in specific neighborhoods and intentionally connect with those neighborhoods. When they have a parish building, they create environments and institutions which serve and express the cultural life of their neighborhoods (art centers, parish-based cafes, etc.). Their leaders live in and engage with their neighborhoods, so that their ministries "emerge" as much as possible from the community. Despite being, again, largely evangelical, their theology of evangelism motivates them to seek out people where they are, refusing to judge people for their unchurched status or anything else, and insisting on befriending and serving people in whatever state they live.
- **They intend to be indigenous expressions of Church.** They do not want to come into a community and tell them the correct cultural manifestation of Church, but rather to facilitate an expression of Church to evolve in response to local culture. They believe God's Spirit is alive in secular culture, and that there should not be an artificial separation of Church and local culture. They are fundamentally incarnational in this way. Since most of the leaders are young, they love young adult culture and seek out places to share Church with young adults. Therefore, much emerging church culture is young adult culture.
- **They are grounded in the Tradition as they insist the Church be relevant to today.** The portmanteau word is "AncientFuture," and it implies a critique of Church which is either mired in out-of-date conventions, practices and doctrinal debates; or superficially guided only by the

passing fads of modern American life. A “Living Tradition” is the conviction of emerging church practitioners. It also especially refers to worship expressions; these evangelically-grounded leaders are re-discovering the richness both of ancient liturgical forms, and of more expressive ceremonial.

- **They value praxis over theory.** You can find much fine theological work in emerging church books and websites, but concrete, community-based experiences of following Jesus and serving in his name are at the heart of the emerging church vision. Emerging church practitioners expect to have their lives changed by the gospel as they engage intentional Christian living and community.
- **They want to recover a multi-sensory experience of worship.** From their location in the Protestant traditions, where a commitment to the Bible and iconoclasm has led to a profound “wordiness,” emerging church practitioners want to develop worship forms that address the whole person and all our senses. Also, inspired by young adult culture with its creative exploration of multi-media, there is a strong sense that conventional worship is dull and unimaginative, unworthy of the glory of God. Emerging church liturgy, therefore, tends to make creative use of a wide variety of worship tools, from icons to Power Point, from organs to electric guitars, from candles to light shows.

Why does the emerging church matter?

Why should we as Anglicans, care about the Emerging Church? A few reasons leap out:

- The Anglican Churches in Canada and the United States continue to be in chronic decline. For the sake of mission to people for whom conventional parishes are an impossible means of entry into the Church, we need new models of Christian community. The emerging church is one successful and increasingly visible model with excellent theological underpinning.
- If we care about young adults and the Church, we should care about the

emerging church. It is one of the few models succeeding in attracting large numbers of 18-35 year olds to the Church in recent years.

- Increasing numbers of Anglican clergy, especially younger ones, are finding it a compelling model for their own expression of ministry.
- Oddly enough, even though the Anglican denominations have been the last ones in North America to take the emerging church seriously, it actually began in the evangelical end of the Church of England (where it is now been officially blessed and budgeted as “Fresh Expressions.”) The emerging church is ours, and it is time we embraced it.

Some weaknesses common to emerging church worship

After worshipping at a lot of emerging churches, I have experienced many different kinds of “liturgy.” I hesitate to generalize about them, for several reasons: 1) the traditions the particular communities draw on are diverse (from specific mainline models, to conventional evangelical structures, to utterly free-form); 2) many emerging communities do not want to be “churches” in a conventional sense, but take more of the form of para-churches or house churches; in that context, the worship tends to be very simple, informal, intimate, and spontaneous, and barely what we Anglicans would call “liturgy”; 3) it is my sense that the emerging church has a stronger liturgical expression in the UK as a result of its foundation in the Church of England rather than, as here, in evangelical traditions. I have participated in many emerging church worship experiences that were wonderfully rich. But a number of the emerging church services I have attended suffered from many of the same weaknesses or challenges:

- Emerging Churches have a strong sense of community. People are not having quiet prayerful moments in the pews before the service. They are engaging, clearly continuing connections they have throughout the week. However, more often than not, the worship itself does not contribute to that connectedness and community-

building. One gets the sense that “real community” happens somewhere “out there”: perhaps in service projects, social events, church committees, and bible study. Despite the emphasis on community in the self-description of these churches, they have rarely asked themselves how to develop and nurture community in the worship context. Only in rare instances were the attempts at connecting people in worship anything but strained and awkward efforts. Because real community happens somewhere else, there is often a lack of rigorousness in applying the values of the community to its worship as well as the rest of its life. For instance, despite a commitment to horizontal, egalitarian leadership and broad participation, much emerging church worship is very hierarchical and male, and the role of the congregation is quite passive.

- Therefore, despite the clear intention of the worship designers, most of this type of emerging church worship tends to be as passive as any other conventional worship. It is a curious experience: a rock band will be banging away, a singer will be soulfully singing, and we are all standing in our pews, slightly moving our bodies, hands awkwardly hanging onto the pew in front of us, unable to sing along, passive in a way no average rock concert audience would be. The invisible wall of the “sanctuary” is still quite palpable, and no real thoughtfulness has gone into the question of how to take excellent music to the next step of being an experience in which everyone actively joins.
- A parallel characteristic is the lack of a sacramental instinct. If there is a eucharist (and, in evangelical circles, the tendency of emerging churches to have a eucharist is one of their outstanding signs), it is usually a loaf of bread and grape juice; the pastor says the institution narrative (after the length of the sermon, for this Anglican, the brevity of the “anaphora” is shocking); he (and it is almost always he) places the bread and juice on a

stand; the people come forward, tear off a piece of the bread, and dip it in the juice; and then they go back to their pews to consume the bread at the prompt of another brief pastoral prayer. “Prayers of the People” are rare, and individual actions on the part of the congregants are often limited to putting their offering in the plate. There is no evident knowledge of the ancient forms of the Eucharist or other sacramental liturgies.

- Having no history of incarnating sacramental liturgy in multiple cultures, the forms for music and art tends to be fairly monochromatic – drawn from Christian contemporary formulas in the case of the music, and a kind of faux graffiti imagery in the case of the visual art. Both are usually of high quality, but there is little instinct to draw on a variety of traditions from Christian art and music, or from diverse non-Christian sources. A profoundly limited aesthetic is the result.
- In many of the evangelically-descended churches, the commitment to non-judgmentalism has not led to a critique of the conventional soteriology of the evangelical tradition. The two co-exist in somewhat strained parallel, and as a result, the rather liberal forms of worship present us with a quite conservative vision of salvation. (I mean “liberal” and “conservative” in their generic sense, not the political one.)
- A commitment to “**reaching-out, befriending, living-with**” forms of evangelism, rather than “inviting them in and making them like us” forms.
- A commitment to forms of community development which **emerge organically from growing relationships focused on discernment**, rather than created programmatically and imposed on existing demographics.
- A commitment to *lex orandi, lex credendi*: **the corporate worship of God as the lifeblood and formative center for the life of the community**, the place from which all the mission flows.
- A commitment to **sacramental, and especially eucharistic, living**, grounded and shaped by the tradition, especially informed by ancient forms of worship and prayer.
- A commitment to be **grounded in the Spirit**, listening in prayer to each other, our diocesan leaders and partners, and the community, to discern the direction of Christian mission.
- A commitment to **a rich aesthetic**, drawing on a wide diversity of artistic expressions of worship and community life.
- A commitment to an understanding that salvation is not inherent in what you think or feel, but in the journey of human fellowship and Christian discipleship; therefore, **a progressive and inclusive theology shapes the community**.

An emerging church/Anglican synthesis?

In all these instances, Anglican liturgical theology and practice offers a strong and inspirational corrective. There is so much the Anglican Churches in the US and Canada could learn from the emerging church, and a great deal we could offer in return. A synthesis of the best of emerging church and Anglican tradition is suggested:

- A commitment to **intentional Christian community** of practice, prayer, worship, growth and service, grounded in the life of faithfully following Jesus.
- A commitment to Christian community and worship that is **indigenous**, especially to local young adult culture.

After a year of attending emerging church communities, and enjoying the friendship of their leaders and participants, I have had my own Christian discipleship deeply renewed by their intentional and grassroots-oriented way of life. Our congregations are in desperate need of this renewing force, which is the Holy Spirit making a fuss and making things new. If we can keep our gift of order from preventing us from seeing the gifts the emerging church has to offer, we can collaborate missionally with emerging church practitioners for the sake of the renewal of our own critically threatened tradition.

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