



Missional Journal

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Missional, Emerging, Emergent: A Traveler's Guide Part B

In the previous *Missional Journal* I began sorting through some of the distinctions between the missional, emerging, and emergent groups. While these categories are not sharp-edged, they definitely have different flavors. In this article I will try to tease apart emerging and emergent.

Some would question whether this distinction is even appropriate. Tony Jones, national coordinator of Emergent Village, has recently blogged his objection: "... people are making a huge mistake, methinks, because they are perpetuating the very modern mistake of separation and fragmentation. . . . Drawing lines and defending borders never ends well for the line-drawers because before you know it, someone has drawn a line right behind your heels and, guess what, you're suddenly on the other side of the line with me." Well, yes, but map-makers do draw lines and not always with sinister intent. The question is whether there are discernible differences; I believe there are.

Emerging

The emerging movement is international in scope and incredibly diverse in terms of theology, organizational forms, and practical expressions. Tom Sine locates the source of the "emerging stream" in Britain in the late 1980s; from there it spread to New Zealand, Australia, and North America in the mid 1990s [*The New Conspirators* (InterVarsity, 2008), pp. 33-37].

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger propose this broad definition: "Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures" [*Emerging Churches* (Baker, 2005), p. 44]. The definition suggests that these churches are particularly concerned with the implications of the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity. **Moreover, emerging churches see themselves as residents in the new culture rather than aliens.** And, while they see challenges to the gospel within the new context, they are probably more likely to see opportunities.

The emerging church also draws inspiration from the developing science of *emergence* theory. This is the study of how patterns of coherence arise spontaneously in complex (and apparently chaotic) systems—from ant colonies, to medieval cities, to the internet. Emergence theory argues that dynamic

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systems grow out of a combination of top-down and bottom-up processes that unleash the creativity necessary for organisms to adapt and thrive in their environments.

Emerging church leaders are therefore quite prepared to reinvent traditional church structures and leadership roles in favor of promoting life.

Tim Keel, pastor of Jacob's Well church in Kansas City, Missouri, writes: "Most of us inhabit social systems in which all the questions of organization were answered long before we arrived on the scene. This is why many within the emerging church movement have begun communities from scratch. Creative types are often unwilling to navigate labyrinthine administrative structures in order to get permission to do something they could more easily do on their own" [*Intuitive Leadership* (Baker, 2007), p. 200].

The very mention of the emerging church creates anxiety for many believers, for a number of reasons:

1. Some respected evangelical leaders have weighed in heavily against the movement, not always fairly or with understanding. (So for many of their followers "emerging" simply equals "bad.")
2. The comfort with, or even enthusiasm for, things postmodern frightens many Christians who assume that postmodernity means a denial of our ability to know or affirm truth.
3. Emerging church representatives have not always been kind in their evaluation of current church life (tending to be particularly critical of evangelical or fundamentalist churches).
4. Perhaps most significantly, some leaders of the emerging movement have given the impression that they have less than a high view of the authority of the Bible and the importance of sound theological formulations.

In spite of the fears many have about the emerging movement, I think that overall it marks a healthy and necessary development. As I have argued in earlier articles, there are many signs that the Western church is in crisis. I am also convinced that there are no "silver bullet" solutions to this crisis. What we need are a lot of bright and committed people reading Scripture with fresh eyes, asking hard questions about accepted practices and traditions, and risking comfort, security, and approval to follow the Spirit in some bold kingdom ventures.

If this begins to happen (and I think it already has), we should not be surprised to find some unsatisfactory developments. This is not uncommon in renewal movements. The Protestant Reformation produced not only the more theologically orthodox traditions of Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Anabaptism, but also problematic groups on the fringe like the Socinians. The answer is not to close down the important discussions that are taking place but to **continually bring these discussions back to Scripture** interpreted within a commitment to generous orthodoxy (see [Missional Journal 1.6](#)).

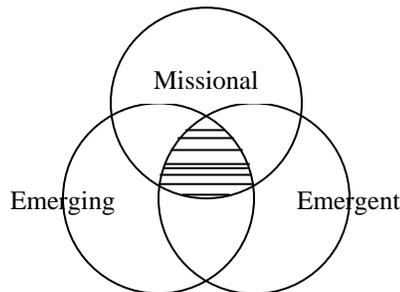
Because of its breadth and diversity, there is no single organization that speaks for the emerging church. However, one of the best ways to take the pulse of the

movement is to spend time on the web site (<http://www.jesuscreed.org/>) of **Scot McKnight**, professor of religious studies at North Park University in Chicago. McKnight is one of the leading figures in the emerging church. He models faithfulness to Scripture, passion for the gospel, an ecumenical vision for the church, and a consistent fairness and civility too often neglected in theological discourse.

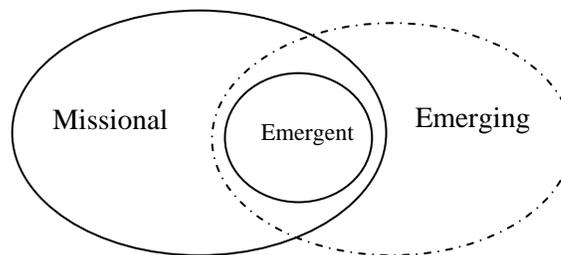
Other important voices in the emerging church include: **Dan Kimball**, pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California, and author of *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Zondervan, 2003), and *They Like Jesus, But Not The Church: Insights From Emerging Generations* (Zondervan, 2007); **David Fitch**, pastor of Life on the Vine Christian Community, Chicago, Illinois, and author of *The Great Giveaway* (Baker, 2005); and Australians **Michael Frost** and **Alan Hirsch** who jointly authored *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Hendrickson, 2003). Separately they wrote (Frost) *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Hendrickson, 2006) and (Hirsch) *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Brazos, 2006).

Emergent

Earlier I suggested that missional, emerging, and emergent could be diagrammed like this:



But now let's refine the diagram slightly:



This drawing emphasizes each group's missional concern but now focuses particularly on the relationship of emergent to the emerging church.

Emergent falls within the broader categories of emerging and missional. The primary platform for emergent is Emergent Village. Their web site gives the

following history: “Emergent Village began as a group of friends who gathered under the auspices and generosity of [Leadership Network](#) in the late 1990s. We began meeting because many of us were disillusioned and disenfranchised by the conventional ecclesial institutions of the late 20th century” (<http://www.emergentvillage.com/about/>).

Disillusionment with existing church models is probably greater in this group than in the missional or emerging categories. **For this reason the emergent critique of the past tends to be edgier and angrier.** Many emergents have an almost knee-jerk reaction to anything that suggests fundamentalism or conservative evangelicalism. Brian McLaren, the most visible of the emergent leaders, has challenged traditional views on biblical authority, the nature of truth, the nature of the atonement, eschatology, and human sexuality, to name just a few flash-points.

McLaren is perplexing because part of his style has been to raise suggestive (and important!) questions without clearly tipping his hand about his own answers. I believe he has done this to “loosen up” the discussion, or, if we employ a different metaphor, to create some new wine-skins. He is quick to point out that Jesus was not afraid to raise disturbing questions without providing clear or quick answers.

However, the absence of greater clarity on his part has encouraged people to read some of his comments as betraying liberal inclinations. It is probably fair to say that the negativism expressed by many Christians toward emergent-emerging-missional developments has more to do with second-hand contact with McLaren’s views (or his supposed views) than any other single factor. Unquestionably a more precise affirmation of evangelical orthodoxy would help his case with conservative Christians, but so far McLaren has been unwilling to provide it.

This leads me to a last comment about emergent leaders. **They are quite explicit in their agenda to find a middle way between what they regard as the extremes of the 20th century church: liberalism and fundamentalism.** Both “isms” were responses to modernity—and postmodernity has undermined both. Tony Jones acknowledges the challenge of the emergent agenda: “This is a tricky middle path between the certainties of evangelicalism and the openness of liberalism, and the jury is out as to whether this middle ground is really a tenable place to stand” [*The New Christians* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), p. 71]. That’s a fair assessment, and I find it encouraging that Jones sees the issue clearly. I think what the emergents desire is possible and I hope they will succeed. At this point the signals are mixed.

Final Clarifications

Any map is an approximation—some roads aren’t on the map and some that are don’t get you exactly where you hoped they would. This little map labors under some of the same limitations. There are names that probably should have been mentioned that were not. And I suspect some of the people mentioned might

prefer to identify themselves in a different way. To both groups I offer my apologies.

Finally I should observe that there are key people—most already mentioned—who by virtue of their high visibility and influence can not be limited to any one category. These would include Alan Roxburgh, Scot McKnight, John Franke, Tim Keel, Brian McLaren, and the affable Andrew Jones (<http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/>).

In the next issue of the *Journal* I will offer some reflections on the qualities of missional leadership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

