

The Emerging Church: Postmodern Worshipping Communities or an Emerging Ecclesiology?

Experiments—the so-called “postmodern worshipping communities”—have been emerging around the world, especially in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Australia. The rate of proliferation is amazing—“google” emerging churches and see what you get! Some are sponsored by churches and denominations, while others are nondenominational or independent; many are Christian, others are Jewish, and a few are still trying to decide. Virtually all of them that I am interested in are birthed by people from the first postmodern generation (so-called Generation X) and colonized and cultivated by people from that generation as well as the next (the so-called Millennials). This is not insignificant to the work of ministry. Many, so many of the aforementioned people were groomed by “the church” and eventually checked out, in search of other forms of communal, religious life.

The following observations and musings are intended to instigate conversation about this emerging, quasi-global development. The following twenty-one observations are offered to help us think and wonder about emerging ministry with the younger generations; to spark curiosity, stir imagination; and to prompt reflection on our current practices of ministry in light of *what is actually taking place* in communities of faith created and inhabited by twenty and thirty-some things. You are invited, even encouraged, to discover points of resonance and connect some of what you find below to your own experience. Please suggest books, websites or other resources that will help us along the way, and visit www.emergingleadersnetwork.org to join the conversation.

Whatever their origins, common principles and practices are noticeable in many emerging church communities:

- 1) Worship is planned and led by a team. Various kinds of expertise are represented, including such areas as music, the arts, theology, philosophy, literature, poetry, graphic design, and audio and video technology. Ordained persons may or may not be in the team.
- 2) Continuous feedback loops critique and inform planning for each experience. Elements may be used repeatedly (in other words, there may be a kind of embedded *ordo*), but each worship experience is, to some degree, unique.
- 3) The arts (often generated locally), including painting, sculpture, graphics, poetry, drama, dance and movement are used extensively to provide non-discursive, non-linear expressions of thoughts and feelings.
- 4) Language is a key issue. Narrative is primary, with emphasis given to “real” experience and words; rote, wooden, “churchy” language is meaningless and seldom employed. If used, it often evokes immediate suspicion or is quickly disregarded.
- 5) Worship is not over defined or prescribed. Making space for spontaneity is important, and this is the Spirit’s domain. Multiple interpretations are expected and sought. Meanings are found not anticipated by the planners.
- 6) Although most experiments so far use a “rock” idiom, other styles of music, such as “Gregorian,” Celtic, Taize chant, techno/club vibe and other modes are also used. There are some experiments to create new musical styles that serve new texts.

- 7) The worship space and time are usually not traditional. Part of the worship experience includes creating a sacred time and space that fits into the natural rhythm of a community's life, sometimes in an intentionally profane setting.
- 8) Humor is expected, natural, and naturally used.
- 9) There is a rich and ample understanding of text that includes a full range of referentiality. Thus the extensive use of a variety of "texts" from pop culture including allusions to television commercials and shows, film, and video from the past and present.
- 10) Suffering—personal, social, and environmental—is acknowledged as a critical part of reality. It is seen as something to be joined and befriended rather than conquered or fixed.
- 11) There is a self-conscious awareness that new forms of worship are needed during epochal change. Christians talk of a "second reformation." Jews seek an expression that is more than survival.
- 12) A mission statement or statement of faith is usually prominent and figural in the life of the community. It serves as lodestar rather than litmus test.
- 13) There is a genuine appreciation of diversity of age, gender, race, economic status, religious background or lack, sexual orientation, ethnicity. All human experience is valid, though diversity is not forced onto or into a community for the sake of being diverse.
- 14) Categories (e.g., "liberal" and "conservative") are regarded as wooden and useless, often stifling, and occasionally even destructive.
- 15) Worship grows out of and creates community; there is a reciprocal relationship between these two realities
- 16) God is experienced as radical transcendence and radical immanence. All three members of the Trinity are given equal importance in Christian worship.
- 17) Preaching and teaching and texts of songs, hymns and rituals may be classically "orthodox." An "ancient-future" connection between postmodern and premodern traditions may be sensed and explored.
- 18) There is not a felt need to judge or condemn other faiths or religious expressions.
- 19) Worship often includes an opportunity to connect personally with the "spiritual" through silent and directed meditation, silence, music, the arts, etc.
- 20) Real, actual experience—of the individual and of the group—is always paramount. Conceptual or theoretical descriptions are suspect.
- 21) Emerging church is not to be confused with the popular modernist "models" (e.g., church growth approach, mega-church organizations). In fact, there is a palpable aversion to such thinking, language, and approaches. The emerging church is the coming of age of Gen X and now Gen Y sensibilities. The figural question for many emerging church communities—"*What does it mean to be who we are where we are?*"—exposes a rich, radically indigenous, organic theology of context that is operative in the life of the people. "Postmodern" worship may grow out of "boomer" experiments, but it is a new experience.