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EDITORS: DANA HORRELL AND CYNTHIA WOOLEVER—WWW.THEPARISHPAPER.COM

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What Is the Emerging Church?

In a pub in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Peter Rollins and a group called the Ikon collective organized a religious event for visitors in town for a conference called "Re-emergence." After opening with a call to worship, Rollins offers a "theo-dramatic" performance, using a large antique book as a prop, which he says contains "the story of tonight." Chapter one, he says, is called "To Believe Is Human" and chapter two is titled, "To Doubt Is Divine." In the low light of the pub, as the patrons drink beer, a guitarist sings a lament shaped by the Book of Jeremiah ("I've found my home in Babylon"). At one point in the service, a black-and-white video loop shows a burning church building and Rollins calls for an "insurrection" that transforms the power structures of the present world.[1]

Tearing Down in Order to Build Anew

The Belfast gathering can be considered part of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM), a small, diffuse, and influential movement of leaders and congregations in the United States, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. As described by sociologists Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, emerging churches are committed to "deconstructing" church belief and practice in the face of what is seen as the pressure to conform. By creating spaces in which to question old practices and try out new ones, they hope to create a more authentic Christian faith.[2]

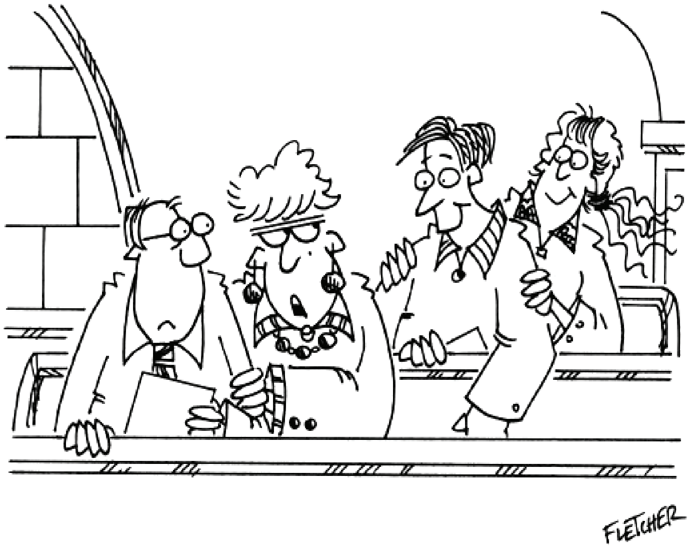
How it Began

The terms "emerging" and "emergence" began to be used by a number of writers and church leaders after 2000 to describe a way of shaping congregations that, in their opinion, were more authentic and attuned to current social realities than either the seeker megachurch or mainline Protestantism. The conversation began in the 1990s with a series of conferences for youth leaders and campus ministers focused on how to reach out to a new generation of young people. Given the amount of information about religion available to young people online, it could no longer be assumed that their starting point was Christianity.[3] In light of this new reality, writers such as Brian McLaren, Peter Rollins, Tony Jones, and Phyllis Tickle have called for forging a new "emerging" or "emergent" church.

Defining Features of the Emerging Church

While acknowledging ECM leaders' resistance to being labeled or defined, sociologists Marti and Ganiel identify several key features.[4]

Anti-Institutional. Emergent leaders consistently identify themselves as anti-institutional. They take a strong stance against present institutional practices, seeing it as their right and obligation to criticize. In the US, the focus of criticism is that seeker megachurches use elaborate entertainment to attract new people. One woman said, "I remember walking in every week and expecting to be wowed." The services are "gimmicky" and "manipulative." In the UK and Northern Ireland, the focus of criticism has been the mainline church, whose services are boring



"THIS CHURCH IS REALLY INTERESTED IN ANCIENT SPIRITUAL PRACTICES... THEY ASKED ME WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO WORSHIP BACK IN THE 80's."

and repetitive, and whose leaders seem more intent on perpetuating old traditions than understanding them. One man said, "I began to see the danger of a structure so wedded to tradition and formalism."[5]

Conversational. In books, blogs, and conferences, emergent leaders have emphasized the role of conversation as central to faith. For example, Doug Pagitt, founding pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, which meets in the round with couches and recliners, explained to an interviewer, "We're trying to say something about where power lies in our community. And so to meet in the round says all of these people matter."[6] The sermon itself may take the form of a question and answer session rather than a set piece by the preacher. Emergent leaders see conversation as a way of keeping beliefs and positions open-ended and provisional, not final, allowing believers to maintain their individuality, rather than having beliefs forced on them by a leader or other worshipers.[7]

Experimental. Emergent Christians stress experimentation and creativity for the purpose of shaking up conventional sensibilities. For example, at House of Mercy in St. Paul, Minnesota, the communion table has elements not usually associated with the sacrament—three pottery cups, a matching pitcher, and a basket of bread. A candle burns on the table, as well as several votive candles. Emergent communities might use any number of ancient practices, mixing and remixing them in ways unique to their own congregation.[8] As one participant said, "If you bring all these elements together (i.e., prayer labyrinths, art, different types of music, different types of expression, etc.) and mix them up . . . then you've created a path for someone to follow in their worship of God."[9]

Nontraditionally Located. Meeting locations for emerging church gatherings tend to be held in spaces not traditionally associated with church. These could be public places such as restaurants, bars, or art museums, or transitional spaces such as storefronts or abandoned warehouses. Spaces can be borrowed, rented, or purchased and repurposed for religious use. Amid all the variety, the common feature is "to create a new type of 'neutral religious space' that is church-ish without being church-y."[10]

Who Are They, and How Many?

Congregations that identify themselves as "emerging" are predominantly young, single, childless, and well-educated. A survey of eight congregations found approximately 40% of members with bachelor's degrees and an additional 24% with graduate degrees. Only 44% were married, and about one-third of them had children. The loose, spontaneous nature of gatherings and the absence of children's programing appear to impose barriers for parents with children.[11]

On the question of how many, one survey in 2011 found 700 emerging congregations in the US, and a search of an online database found 300 self-identified emerging congregations in the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. More recently, a survey of leaders in ten denominations in the US identified approximately 8,800 churches (or 7% of these churches) that were led by pastors who identified themselves as emerging, though it is unclear whether their views are shared by their congregations. [12]

Far from Belfast, in Colorado Springs, Tiffany Keith, a United Methodist pastor, gathers friends from the community every other week for a shared meal and storytelling that she calls Stories @ The Edge. In her community organizing efforts, she became acquainted with socially and economically marginalized residents of the city. Inspired by The Moth Radio Hour, she invites three storytellers at each meal to share, using the basic structure of *lectio divina*, an ancient practice of prayer and Scripture reading, to guide the discussion.[13] Though she might not use the label, Keith's experimental effort owes something to the ECM, which continues to wield an outsized influence even though they are small in size.

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1. Gerardo Marti, and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-5.
2. Ibid., 26.
3. Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, "Emergent Fault Lines: Clergy Attitudes Toward the Emergent Church Movement," *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 2016.
4. Marti, and Ganiel, 27-30.
5. Ibid., 110, 111.
6. The Emerging Church, Part One, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly,* July 8, 2005, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2005/07/08/july-8-2005-the-emerging-church-part-one/11744/
7. This view has critics, such as Kevin L. DeYoung and Ted A. Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008).
8. Marti and Ganiel, 39.
9. Ibid., 124-125.
10. Ibid., 128-132, 29.
11. Ibid., 171.
12. Burge and Djupe, 17.
13. Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon, *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2016), 97.

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