

Where is the emerging Church heading?

The fun of this assignment is the diversity of input I received when interviewing emerging church leaders. The responses are from direct emails to an emerging pastor, and an emerging young person, as well as written material from other leaders in the emergent church movement. Dwight Friesen works at Mars Hill Graduate School and pastors an "emerging church" on Seattle's eastside.¹ Dan Burnett is an emerging young person from Langley, BC, who is active in his still quite modern church. The November Issue of Christianity Today provided insight from Brian McLaren and Andy Crouch. And although Stanley Grenz was too busy to directly answer my questions, his website contained an appropriate address he gave in 2002. The following are seven questions that can be used to evaluate ministry. The emerging church will only be as successful as Christians are to living their faith.

Q1. Can you think of a model for the emerging church?

Dwight first identified that he was speaking of more than the Emergent organization.² Rather, he spoke "more broadly of faith communities seeking indigenous, incarnational expressions of Christ-community. As such, there is no one model for emerging church. Indigenous Christ-communities are by definition particular, even with respect to form and model."³ Brian McLaren echoes Dwight's sentiments, "Right now Emergent is a conversation, not a movement," he says. "We don't have a program. We don't have a model."⁴ However, there is the repeated theme of "community" in emergent churches—"Church is not a place one attends

¹ www.quest.nu, www.dwightfriesen.com.

² www.emergentvillage.com

³ Dwight Friesen, Mars Hill Graduate School, pastor of emerging church in Seattle, www.quest.nu, www.dwightfriesen.com, in email interview Oct. 25, 2004.

⁴ Brian McLaren quoted in "The Emergent Mystique" in *Christianity Today*, by Andy Crouch, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/011/12.36.html>.

but a community to which one belongs.”⁵ Stan Grenz, Brian McLaren, and Dan Kimball, to name a few, all use this word to describe the church.

In his article, “Christian Faith in a Postmodern Society”, Stan Grenz first noted the “mistaken understandings of a postmodern church...that it is about a universally applicable formula that can be packaged and exported [and] that it is about outward forms.”⁶ He goes on to identify three elements of a postmodern church: “A postmodern church ministers to the whole person. A postmodern church acknowledges the insufficiency of the individual and the importance of being in relationships. A postmodern church understands its task as that of fostering spirituality.”⁷ These traits support the assumption of church as community. They also bring out the other important thread of spirituality that is prominent in emerging church discussion.

Another element Grenz points out is the emerging church as missional. In his model, “it is postmodern: it views the postmodern condition as the occasion for a renewal of biblical Christianity, [and] it is missional: it seeks to understand the times for the sake of the advancement of the gospel.”⁸ So although they do not claim one model, there are specific emphases that must be visible such as community, spirituality, and mission.

Dan Burnett, who is not a leader in the sense that he pastors a church, but is an emerging young person, used phrases like “passion and intensity...so many people gathered for a common interest... huge emotion and dare I say spiritual intensity... a great chance to teach and worship

⁵ Brian McLaren and Duane Litfin, “Emergent Evangelism” in Christianity Today, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/011/14.42.html>.

⁶ Stan Grenz, “Christian Faith in a Postmodern Society”, Cornerstone Festival, Bushnell IL, July 2-4, 2002, <http://stanleyjgrenz.com/articles/cornerstone.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

if done properly...many different types of people can enjoy and get involved,”⁹ to describe a model for the emerging church.

In his visit to mega emergent church Mars Hill Bible Church, Andy Crouch found a natural/organic and professional approach. “They are works in progress, often startlingly improvisational in their approach to everything...Bell [pastor of Mars Hill] has the comic timing, the charisma, and the confidence you'd expect from someone who speaks to thousands every week. And he has a gift for the preacher's memorable phrase.”¹⁰ The emerging church merges polished professionalism with spontaneous naturalism.

So although there are common elements in models for the emerging church, there is no one model. In a study of future faith churches, Posterski and Nelson found that “future faith churches aren't perfect but they are different. Each of them has found their own unique way to relate their faith tradition to the people around them.”¹¹ As I have gathered so far, the model for the emerging church is communal, spiritual, and missional. But how it goes about living these traits must be unique to each cultural situation.

Q2. How should the church measure success?

The emerging church leaders measure success by how well their churches live out the traits of a “missional-spiritual community”. As emerging pastor Dwight expressed:

Success is very difficult to measure. The best measure I have is an intangible sense of lovingly assisting people in their efforts to connect with other communities, people, resources, rest, creation, God, etc. My goal is not to build a church but help knit people into a Kingdom of God tapestry. The measure of success is love. Love rarely builds large ministries. Love leads to self-emptying in the service of "us". It is marked by surrender, and becoming less.¹²

⁹ Dan Burnett, emerging young person from Langley, BC, in email interview Oct. 25, 2004.

¹⁰ Crouch.

¹¹ Don Posterski and Gary Nelson. *Future Faith Churches: Reconnecting with the Power of the Gospel for the 21st Century*. Wood Lake Books: Winfield, BC, 1997, 175.

¹² Friesen.

Startlingly, when I asked emerging young person Dan this same question, he simply answered, “Witnessed congregational maturity.”¹³ Which is exactly what Dan Kimball says in his book *The Emerging Church*: “The way our church members live throughout the week is our best litmus test of the effectiveness of our preaching.”¹⁴ In the emerging church, there is a renewed emphasis on living what we believe, on exemplifying the faith rather than just knowing or telling it. And in the experiential postmodern age, how people experience the gospel speaks louder than words.

Q3. What are some of the biggest challenges for the church in North America in postmodernism?

In response to this, Dwight exclaimed, “There are so many. The challenge of paradox; by God's grace living in the tension - refusing to settle for ‘Certainty’ and refusing to settle for ‘Uncertainty.’”¹⁵ So are we in an age where society knows God or not? These tensions reflect the challenge of relating Christianity to a world that thinks it already knows what it is (yet has a warped expression) and accepts “god” as whatever one imagines. According to Kimball, “we offer them escape from a peril they don’t know they face, and we use words that either aren’t part of their vocabulary or that they don’t correctly understand.”¹⁶ As he sees it, “our first big challenge in preaching to emerging generations is to regain our voice by earning the trust of our hearers.”¹⁷ This can only be done when we embody the importance of understanding “the spiritual climate, worldview, and major life-concerns of your audience.”¹⁸

¹³ Burnett.

¹⁴ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003, 195.

¹⁵ Friesen.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 172.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 177.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 180.

Secondly, Dwight expressed, “with all of our ‘Ancient-Future’ conversation, the issue of the co-modification of faith traditions is very challenging.”¹⁹ With globalization, world religions are now in our backyard, and eastern religion seems to draw those seeking a spiritual experience. Here we are, where many churches are just getting it down by rationalizing and organizing their faith so it will compete with the corporate and intellectual gurus. And now suddenly, people aren’t looking for managers but mystics! Pastor Brian McLaren says “leadership must once again become a matter of love and spirituality, a place for spiritual sages, not just organizational technicians.”²⁰ Or as Lee Wyatt puts it, “if we are to survive the Twenty-first Century as Christians, it will be necessary for us to become mystics.”²¹ The challenge is to recover the credibility and spirituality of our faith as the truth for meaning in life.

As young Dan sees it, the greatest challenge is the media; “way more exciting and gratifying than a boring church building...[there’s] no need for a boring God.”²² Similarly, McLaren notes “one of the greatest enemies of evangelism is the church as fortress or social club; it sucks Christians out of their neighbourhoods, clubs, workplaces, schools, and other social networks and isolates them in a religious ghetto.”²³ Both of these issues speak of the church being isolated from culture or the culture from God.

Along this line, Grenz speaks to the challenge of relating the gospel and culture, “Should our proclamation be culture-sensitive?” In his view, we are mistaken if we simply answer no or yes:

¹⁹ Friesen.

²⁰ McLaren quoted in Robert E. Webber, The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, 148.

²¹ Lee A. Wyatt, “Preaching to Postmodern People” in Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America. Ed. Craig Van Gelder. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, 162.

²² Burnett.

²³ McLaren, “Emergent Evangelism”.

“No” ...the gospel is transcultural—only the “language of Zion” is needed. The danger of the position: imperialism.

“Yes” ...the gospel is radically cultural—the gospel must be compatible with the thought of the host culture. The danger of the position: syncretism.²⁴

For Grenz, “the appropriate model [is] an interactional or conversational approach [facing both] the challenge to take pop culture seriously [and] the challenge to reset the apologetic face of the Christian faith.”²⁵ I believe the greatest challenge for the church will be changing the way it expresses faith so it once again becomes credible and reliable in our culture, while maintaining Jesus is the only way to truth.

Q4. How does Christianity change in the global community?

First of all, Christians need to be aware of the new pluralist postmodern ethic which globalization has had a part in. Grenz describes this as “a situation in which a multiplicity of communities exists side-by-side, ethical discourse becomes a discussion of the moral practices of differing communities...what appears wrong from one vantage point, when viewed from within the community that practices the act, may actually be right.”²⁶ In the global community, each person lives by his or her own standards, and maintains their right to their belief (except when conflict comes, they are always right and the other is wrong). We can see the dangers of this postmodern ethic.

However, globalization can benefit emerging churches by broadening their narrow worldview. According to Grenz, “a postmodern church celebrates diversity...it seeks to reflect a true multiculturalism...it celebrates the giftedness and ministries of its members, while promoting the unity of the whole...it acknowledges that the Spirit can work in many ways to

²⁴ Grenz.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

accomplish God's will among and through his people."²⁷ The North American church is learning that it does not have a corner on the market of how God works.

In Dwight's words:

Christianity is always changing; it is living. So change within Christianity is nothing new but globalism is. The way to alter an ethos is relational, to truly be in the world and not of it. I believe that Christianity needs to become a more hospitable neighbour, embodying love in ways that lead all of humanity into full life in Christ. Not to pit one against the other but to shape us all by living Christ while making ourselves servants of the world.²⁸

If Christianity is the truth amidst a vast array of other religions claiming to have the answers to life, we don't need to defend our position by condemning others. Rather, God will use Christian lives as evidence of his truth to the global community.

It is important to note that we have a God who never changes. Kimball states, "ancient, medieval, modern, or postmodern—emerged or emerging—when it comes down to it, we still have the same basic human needs. We all want to be accepted. We all want to know that we are loved. We all long for purpose. We also long for spiritual fulfillment and meaning. We long to know our Creator and are born with a hole in our hearts that only he can fill."²⁹ The global community changes the culture in which we relate our faith and how we relate our faith. The best influence of the global change is the renewed challenge for Christians to live spiritual lives amidst their neighbours.

Q5. Why aren't/are young people coming to church anymore?

When I posed this question, I received answers for both sides of the question. Emergent Dan felt the reason young people aren't coming to church is "most closely connected to the media and the pace of the attractive world...young people have probably always had problems

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Friesen.

²⁹ Kimball, 88.

coming to church on their own.”³⁰ His last words “on their own” caught my attention. Dan points out an important change in our independent society—we have an increasing number of split/dysfunctional families, latch key kids, and postmodern values being passed on. There is a decrease in the teaching and training of parents to their children about their heritage of faith. More and more young people are left on their own.

Kimball opens his book with the example of a young person (Sky) who vocally expressed his reasons for not being a Christian: “Christianity is a man-made organized religion...Christians are close-minded, judgemental people...Christians are arrogant to think they alone have the only true religion...[Christianity is] based on opinion and politics... Christians were ready to point out how others were wrong and how they were always right.”³¹ In his case, (thank God) his change only occurred when “for the first time he had actually seen Jesus in people who claimed to be his followers...the first Christians he had ever seen actually worshiping God in as seriously spiritual way.”³² It was the people he came into contact with that made the difference—really it was God in those people.

There is something important to learn here, both reactions of Dan and Sky show the importance of relations. Our churches should be interested in the culture rather than trying to just keep up with the culture. People want to be treated as persons not research projects. Kimball writes, “in spite of all these contemporary additions and amendments, we’re losing ground. Young people for the most part are staying away from churches and are even more interested in exploring other world faiths or spiritual beliefs.”³³ Young people are looking for spiritual experience and we have taken that all out of our churches.

³⁰ Burnett.

³¹ Kimball, 22.

³² Ibid, 23.

³³ Ibid, 40.

On the other hand, Dwight sees "emerging churches" are disproportionately young. Andy Couch in his article on Mars Hill Bible Church points out a number of ways he notices their effort to be culturally relevant including fashion and music. True, "no generation has ever been more alert to such nuances than the media-fed children of the 1980s and '90s, who can sense uncoolness at a thousand paces."³⁴ However, they seem just as intuitive when it comes to genuine spirituality. They are looking for what is real and for people who are worthy of listening to.

Q6. What is important for the church to focus on?

First of all, Dwight said, "they should stop focusing on 'the church'... Christ is the hope of the world, and yes the church embodies Christ. But it's like the story of Peter getting out of the boat to walk to Christ, when his eyes are on himself, the waves and wind he sinks, but when Peter's being is engaged in the relationship with Christ he walks."³⁵ The church needs to start looking out instead of in. Andy Crouch writes, "From Newbigin, McLaren has drawn the idea of the church as "missional"—oriented toward the needs of the world rather than oriented towards its own preservation. From Polanyi and MacIntyre, he concludes that the emerging church must be "monastic"—centred on training disciples who practice, rather than just believe, the faith."³⁶ Dan pointed out this last emphasis in his comments. For him "discipleship...showing God real in your life now... practical application of God in the work place, or day-to-day activities"³⁷ is what is important.

In Mars Hill Bible Church, "they are looking for a faith that is colourful enough for their culturally savvy friends, deep enough for mystery, big enough for their own doubts. To get

³⁴ Crouch.

³⁵ Friesen.

³⁶ Crouch.

³⁷ Burnett.

there, they are willing to abandon some long-defended battle lines”³⁸ yet still claim the Bible as the centre. For them it is important to reach the culture.

Following his model, the important issues for Grenz are:

“The concern for fostering true “community”...people are searching for authentic relationships, but contemporary consumerist culture is ultimately unsatisfying...[the] concern to embody the multidimensional nature of truth...the concern to address the whole person...as body and soul...as reason, emotion and intuition...the concern to promote wisdom, not merely knowledge”³⁹

It is important for the church to represent the wholeness of the gospel, “the gospel we proclaim must move from head to heart and ultimately to hand...the gospel must be embodied in

Christian ethical living: personal holiness [and] in Christian community: corporate holiness.”⁴⁰

In “the quest for ‘the re-enchantment of everyday life’ so as to overcome the loss of ‘soul’ produced by the modern culture”, it is important for the church to focus on example in all areas of life.

Q7. How do you design a worship service?

In response to my final question, Dwight showed himself as a “Trinitarian”, “I believe that worship gathering should highlight our very real differences while giving voice to our oneness in and through the work of God in Christ through the Spirit.”⁴¹ His practical examples had to do with sharing—sharing stories, sharing meals, sharing touch (a hug or laying on of hands for healing).

For Dan, he wasn’t so sure, but he did suggest “maybe no one up front distracting except a leader”⁴² which is a characteristic of emergent worship according to Kimball.⁴³ In his words,

³⁸ Couch.

³⁹ Grenz.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Friesen.

⁴² Burnett.

⁴³ See Kimball chapter 15, “Creating Experiential, Multisensory Worship Gatherings”.

“part of my personal evaluation of a worship band is how well they disappear as they lead.”⁴⁴

Primarily, “our worship facilities should clearly communicate a sense of spirituality.”⁴⁵

Sky, the young person from Kimball’s book, “wanted to experience an authentic spiritual event in which he could see if God was truly alive and being worshiped.”⁴⁶ The emerging generation finds spirituality in the sacred elements, not our worldly cover-ups. If we hide religious symbols, it is seen as shame or embarrassment. Less of us, more of God is needed.

Kimball, and Dwight in his comments, calls for multisensory worship. Kimball wisely notes, “The danger, of course, is focusing so much on experience that we teach people to respond only by feeling and emotions.”⁴⁷ To balance this, “we need to give people truthful experiences along with truthful teaching.”⁴⁸ The emerging church strives to move from spectator sport, to participant fellowship.

Just as there is no one model for the emergent church, “there isn’t just one way to worship.”⁴⁹ In planning a worship gathering, it is necessary to leave “flexibility for spontaneous leading of the Holy Spirit [and spend] time in prayer on our knees asking God what to do.”⁵⁰ As we worship, remember, “Our lives will preach better than anything we can say...people in the emerging generations look at our hearts more than at the words we speak.”⁵¹ In the emergent church, we are witnessing a blessing in the diversity of ways to worship. The key is to bath it in prayer and listen to the Spirit’s leading.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 159.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 139.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 131.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 187.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 120.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 194-5.

Authenticity Stands Out!

From these seven questions, we see again and again the call for Christians to take action. By “take action” I don’t mean start Bible thumping those outside your church, but become the boldest people known to show love to their community. In whatever we do, we must be real, we must be spiritual, and we must be missional. May you strive to live “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thess. 4:12). The emerging church will only be as successful as Christians are to living their faith. But when all is said and done, remember these words of Dan Kimball...

“Life and our spirituality will be messy because we are flawed.”⁵²

Word count: 3181

⁵² Ibid, 183.

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