

The Emergent matrix: A new kind of church

by [Scott Bader-Saye](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

Last spring the Nashville Convention Center played host to both the National Pastors Convention and the Emergent Convention. While the former was largely geared toward evangelical baby boomers, the latter catered to Gen X and Millennial evangelicals (and “postevangelicals”) who are trying to come to grips with postmodernity. Though the two conventions intentionally overlapped, that proximity suggests a closer kinship than may actually exist. Indeed, the professed goal of many in the “Emerging Church” is to embody an alternative to the model of the Willow Creek, seeker-driven church that blankets the contemporary evangelical landscape like kudzu on a southern hillside.

At first glance the differences between the two conventions seemed to be primarily stylistic: the Emergent music was hipper, the videos faster, the clothes trendier, the technology more sophisticated. But for many of the Emergent leaders, the convention’s flashiness did more to confuse than to clarify the nature of the emerging church.

“For the most part, the general sessions just look like an extension of the megachurch movement and the ‘rah-rah’ youth movement—feelings and loudness,” complained Robert Webber, one of the main speakers—as if “the louder you can be, the more direct relationship you have with God.” Adds Webber, professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Seminary: “There’s nothing here in the public face that lifts you theologically or lifts you into liturgy or anything that has historic connection or depth or substance.”

Webber’s critique gets to the heart of a major question for the “emerging church”: as younger generations of evangelicals find themselves dissatisfied with the dominant expressions of “contemporary” church, will they simply engage in a change of style, seeking relevance for a new generation, or will they engage in a change of substance, including a more radical rethinking of the evangelical project?

Brian McLaren, one of the most important figures in the Emergent conversation, would be the first to agree that a change of style alone would miss the mark. To make evangelical revivalism hipper or louder, he says, does not change the fact that it is still just “emotional manipulation.” Neither rap music nor video loops will provide the needed change, since, as he emphasizes, “the real core of this thing is theological.”

“This thing” to which he refers began in the 1990s when a group of young evangelical leaders initiated a conversation (they still prefer to call it a “conversation” rather than a “movement”) about renewing the church for mission in a postmodern world. The dialogue grew out of a sense of both crisis and opportunity.

For evangelicals, the crisis involved their tradition’s theological rigidity, superficial worship and ingrown subculture, and the inability of the boomer-driven megachurches to capture the imaginations of Gen-Xers and Millennials.

At the same time, the mainline churches were facing their own crisis involving declining membership (especially among younger generations), clergy shortages, and deep polarization over issues such as human sexuality. The very churches that had sought to be relevant to the modern world (each in its own way) had become irrelevant to and ill-equipped for the postmodern world.

Overshadowing the sense of crisis, however, has been a contagious sense of opportunity—a belief that the time is right for churches to reshape themselves as thoroughly missional communities. Doing this will require moving beyond the sterile polarities that have defined the church in the modern era: liberal vs. conservative, traditional vs. contemporary, reason vs. experience, faith vs. science, megachurch vs. maintenance church.

The 15 people who make up the Emergent Coordinating Group may constitute the organizational heart of the movement, but the Emergent conversation itself happens primarily at the grassroots level through Web sites, Web logs (or “blogs”), regional cohorts and conferences. The conversation is amorphous by design, since the goal is to cast the net of renewal as widely a possible.

More than 1,400 people met for the Emergent Conventions in San Diego and Nashville this past spring. The list of main speakers reflected the growing theological diversity of the conversation: writer and poet Kathleen Norris, social activist Jim Wallis, Episcopal writer Phyllis Tickle, postmodern (and Roman Catholic) philosopher

John Caputo—hardly the “usual suspects” at an evangelical conference. And though the majority of the participants were from conservative denominations, Vineyard churches or nondenominational churches, there was no shortage of representation from the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church.

“We realized very early on that we weren’t going to find the intellectual resources we needed in the evangelical world, so we were either going to have to create them or borrow them,” notes McLaren. “And it turned out that a lot of us were reading the same people, who would be more respected in the mainline world, such as Walter Brueggemann, Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas. What happened is we started to identify ourselves as postconservative and then we found out that there was almost a parallel movement going on in the postliberal world. And the affinities that we had were very, very strong.”

These affinities grew out of a common desire to get beyond “liberal” and “conservative” ways of thinking about scripture, mission and theology. “When you have a liberal way of being a Christian and a conservative way of being a Christian that are both modern, and modernity is over,” McLaren reasons, “you’ve got to find another way of being a Christian.”

Emergent evangelicals had bumped up against the limits of what George Lindbeck has called their “cognitive-propositional” approach to doctrine—faith as assent to propositional truths—but unlike earlier generations they no longer believed their only other option was to become traditionally “liberal.” Postliberalism, with its emphasis on culture and language, narrative and community, character and virtue, opened possibilities for being theologically serious and doctrinally orthodox while avoiding the restrictive biblicism of the evangelical world.

The challenges faced by evangelicals and mainliners are in some ways mirror images of each other. McLaren observes that “conservatives tend to be rigid theologically and promiscuous pragmatically and liberals tend to be rigid methodologically and a lot more free theologically.” His proposal is simple: “Maybe we could trade.”

The convention largely confirmed his observation. At its best it created space for such “trades” to happen. For example, at a breakfast conversation sponsored by the Emerging Women Leaders Initiative, women from mainline churches shared powerful

words of hope and encouragement with evangelical women who struggle to have a voice in their traditions. On the other side, the creative and lively worship at the convention struck a chord with many mainliners, whose worship has often lacked such energy and passion. The trading continued as evangelicals, many of whom dismissed the techno-savvy worship with a “been there, done that,” plied the mainliners for ideas about renewing worship through liturgy. The cross-pollination was intense and enriching.

As important as the mainline-evangelical conversation is, McLaren sees something else going on. “I think the real story is both evangelicals and the mainline learning from Catholics.”

The emerging church is not shy about raiding the storehouses of the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and the Anglicans for richer liturgies as well as prayer beads, icons, spiritual direction, *lectio divina* and a deeper sacramentality. The return to ancient faith and practice is increasingly seen as a way forward in churches polarized by worship wars and theological intransigence.

Thus, emerging churches often characterize themselves as “ancient-future,” a phrase that comes from a series of books authored by Webber (*Ancient-Future Faith*, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, *Ancient-Future Time*). This return to the past should not be confused with a nostalgia for 1950s Protestantism or with a circling of the wagons around a purer Reformation theology. The return is deeper, looking to the treasures of the medieval and patristic theologies and to practices that have long been ignored by evangelicals.

The convention tipped its hat to the ancient by constructing a portal to the past in the form of a prayer labyrinth. Conventioneerers passed from the fluorescent daytime of the convention hallway into the darkness of the sacred space, dimly lit by candles. The labyrinth filled the room. One by one participants filed in to walk the path of prayer. But unlike the ancients, these postmodern pilgrims carried portable CD players which guided them through the journey and provided ambient music. Along the way, walkers paused at stations to engage in spiritual exercises. A stone and a bucket of water, a map and a compass, bread and wine all became instruments of prayer and meditation.

Despite the undeniable power of these retrieved practices, one must wonder if the incense, candles, labyrinths and all the rest are being retrieved simply because

they've become cool. Tangible, multisensory worship has a currency among younger generations, and this is all to the good. But if this recovery is linked only to generation and style, what will happen when styles change?

"I think the major problem is that you may be rediscovering the ancient as a new gimmick," comments Webber. "If you don't do the theological thinking that stands behind liturgy and sacrament and all the kinds of things that are part and parcel of the classical tradition, this will just fade out. It will have no staying power. The next generation is going to come along and do something different."

If a practice is reintroduced simply because it meets the needs or desires of a generation, it will only reinforce the modern penchant for novelty. One test for the emerging church will be whether ancient practices are retrieved *as practices* or simply as preferences.

Unlike the megachurch and church growth movements of the 1980s and '90s, emerging churches resist models and templates—the franchising of church life. Instead they tend to emphasize the particular gifts of the local community and the creative involvement of the laity. Karen Ward, pastor of Church of the Apostles in Seattle, wrote in a recent blog, "In the emerging church the people shift from being consumers of church to producers of church."

Holly Rankin Zaher, a member of the Emergent Coordinating Group, and her husband, Jim, are founding members of Three Nails, an Episcopal church plant near Pittsburgh. Jim describes it as "a cell group thing that looks incredibly different from other Episcopal churches. Right now we have six cell groups, and that's where the core is. People ask us where our church is and we say, 'Well, it's not,' because we have groups meeting all over Pittsburgh. We don't own a building, we just rent a place where we meet as a group once a month."

Reflecting on what makes Three Nails a new kind of church, Jim immediately points to the communal sharing of ministry. "At our corporate meetings the liturgy really is 'the work of the people.' You could come in sometimes and ask 'Is there a priest here?' There is a priest, but the people aren't just plugged into set roles—acolytes, readers; for us it changes each week." The laity is involved not just in leading worship but in creating worship.

Though no two gatherings are exactly the same, a typical evening might begin with corporate worship and then break up for participants to work their way through a

series of interactive stations flanking the worship space. At each station the participant would encounter a passage of scripture to be read, a prayer to be said, a question for reflection, an image to be viewed, an activity to be engaged in, or all of the above. The community would then join together to share the Eucharist, after which they would break into small groups for prayer.

If “contemporary worship” and “seeker services” looked like Christian versions of rock concerts, emerging worship looks more like a Christian version of Starbucks. Small spaces, comfortable seating (preferably couches) and interactivity are prized. But here, alongside the accouterments of café culture, are the very signs of Christian identity that had been purged by the iconoclasm of Willow Creek and its descendants. Candles and crosses, bread and wine, incense and altars create an eclectic, ancient-future blend with the video projection screens, electric guitars, and televisions rolling looped images like postmodern icons. The ambiance evokes more the art gallery than the arena, and the technological elements are intentionally subdued, made subservient to personal connection and spiritual reflection.

Emerging worship tends to be multisensual, multilayered, and multimedia. Its embrace of art and image link it more strongly to an iconic history than to traditional Protestant worship. The integration of media clips from popular culture seeks to bridge the gap between Sunday and Monday, sacred and secular, recognizing that God is often found in unlikely places.

This heavily lay-led movement tends to gravitate toward nondenominational, house church models disconnected from a larger body, both in terms of support and accountability. Such a view of the church suggests that modernity still has a foothold in this self-proclaimed “postmodern” conversation. In Emergent rhetoric one hears echoes of the Enlightenment-era suspicion of authority and the tendency toward privatizing and individualizing faith.

A lingering distrust of the “institutional church” has made partnership with mainline denominations difficult. For their part, mainline churches have generally failed to create space for new expressions of church to thrive.

It seems clear, however, that emergents and mainliners need each other. The traditional denominations could benefit from the creative energy of the emerging churches, while the emerging communities could benefit from the rich resources and history of the larger body.

Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, recently issued a call to the Church of England that speaks to this challenge: “We have to ask whether we are capable of moving towards a more ‘mixed economy’—recognizing church where it appears and having the willingness and the skill to work with it. Mission, it’s been said, is finding out what God is doing and joining in. And at present . . . more and more patterns of worship and shared life are appearing on the edge of our mainstream life that cry out for our support, understanding and nurture if they are not to get isolated and unaccountable.”

While emerging churches talk a lot about being relevant to postmodern culture, they are also aware that there is a danger in relevance. Lauren Winner, author of *Girl Meets God*, posed the question this way at the convention: “How do you simultaneously attend to the culture and be a pocket of resistance? You can’t be a pocket of resistance without attending . . . but I still think people come to church when church is different from the world, when there is something noticeably ecclesial in the broadest sense, when church seems like church rather than a shopping mall.”

An Emergent definition of relevance, modulated by resistance, might run something like this: relevance means listening before speaking; relevance means interpreting the culture to itself by noting the ways in which certain cultural productions gesture toward a transcendent grace and beauty; relevance means being ready to give an account for the hope that we have and being in places where someone might actually ask; relevance means believing that we might learn something from those who are most unlike us; relevance means not so much translating the church’s language to the culture as translating the culture’s language back to the church; relevance means making theological sense of the depth that people discover in the oddest places of ordinary living and then using that experience to draw them to the source of that depth (Augustine seems to imply such a move in his reflections on beauty and transience in his *Confessions*). Relevance might simply mean wanting to understand why so many young people have said that attending U2’s Elevation Tour and hearing Bono close the show with choruses of “Hallelujah” was like being in worship (but a whole lot better).

This kind of relevance will also include the recognition that the church becomes relevant precisely by offering something that the culture does not. In a loud and frenzied world, that may mean creating a space where people can bask in silence and rest in liturgical rhythms. In a world of superficial entertainment, it may mean

throwing parties that nurture deep and authentic community. In these ways relevance and resistance begin to look more like dance partners and less like competing suitors for the church's soul.

Perhaps "relevant-resistant" is another way of naming the "incarnational" church. To incarnate the reign of God means to take on local flesh, to speak the vernacular, to dive deep into the cultural particularities of a time and place. But as Jesus shows, to embody God's word in a time and place is both to participate in the world of the fallen and to offer an alternative to that world. The emerging church, to be anything other than a hip blip on the radar of American religion, will need to live the tension of "relevant-resistant" no less than it lives the tension of "ancient-future."

What will become of this movement at the end of the day when the fog machines and video projectors are packed away? Will the emerging church be able to sustain its focus on theological renewal without being coopted by trends, hype and marketing? Will it turn out to be just another instance of narcissistically reinventing the church to suit one's own preferences? Or will the gaze begin to turn outward toward transformative mission?

I left the convention cautiously hopeful. I am attracted to the pragmatic ecumenism of Emergent, whose goal is not to create a unified structure at the top but to recognize that the churches are going to need an exchange of gifts at the grassroots. I am intrigued by the creative possibilities of ancient-future worship—liturgical structure overlaid with image, music and movement, technologically aware but refusing to flaunt it. I am heartened by the search for a theological "third way"—a generous orthodoxy that may yet arise from the dialogue of postconservatives and postliberals. I am encouraged by the vision of a truly missional church, both relevant and resistant, that incarnates a real alternative to mainline "maintenance" churches and evangelical "megachurches."

So often the church is renewed "from the edges, not the center," as Rowan Williams has pointed out. As we attend to what is emerging at the edges of the American scene, we would do well to keep that lesson in mind and to heed Williams's further advice: "Be grateful for new things happening, even if they are not easily digestible."