Emerging model: A visit to Jacob's Well

by Jason Byassee in the September 19, 2006 issue

The Westport neighborhood of midtown Kansas City, Missouri, is a mix of avant-garde youth and aging hippies. If bumper stickers are any indication, political views range from the muscular left (“Veterans for Kerry”) to the forthrightly left (“Peace is patriotic”) to the crudely left (“Dump the son of a Bush!”). The first man I passed on the street had his shirt off and displayed pierced nipples. No doubt he was on his way to one of the area’s many wine bars or tattoo parlors.

This neighborhood is also home to a thriving church called Jacob’s Well, which attracts about 1,000 people each week to its various services. The church is led by Tim Keel, who, along with author Brian McLaren, is a founder of the Emergent movement. I went to JW hoping that it could help me understand a phenomenon that remains elusive—the Emergent church.

The innovative JW is housed, ironically, in a classic church building that Presbyterians erected in 1930. The building is the envy of the numerous congregations in the neighborhood, including two that have exchanged their denominational labels for more jazzy names and logos—one Southern Baptist (now River City Church) and one Evangelical Covenant (now City Church).

The classical space and biblically resonant name suit JW just fine, and they also say something about the Emergent movement. If yesteryear’s evangelical church was the equivalent of a starter castle in the exurbs, JW is more akin to a rehabilitated loft in a gentrifying city. Whereas evangelical churches (and increasing numbers of mainline ones) seek to attract young people by designing spaces stripped of Christian symbols or tradition, JW people seem to like the traditional feel of the sanctuary, with its dark wood, stained glass and high ceilings. While other churches would be thrilled by the numerical growth—1,000 attenders after seven years of existence—JW worries that the growth means it may not be intimate enough to nurture community and friendship. A recent sermon on stewardship insisted,

apparently in all seriousness, that the church didn't need any more money or volunteers, so giving of time or money should come only out of genuine gratitude.

In short, JW is a rebuke to those churches that, in imitation of cutting-edge 1970s evangelicalism, deliberately strip themselves of historical symbols, creeds and practices in an effort to grow. JW is succeeding by moving in precisely the opposite direction.

JW changed very little about the sanctuary when it bought the building in 2003 (with cash) after renting the space for four years. It moved the altar table out from the wall, removed choir pews to make room for a band, and took down the pulpit (Keel preaches at eye level). Other parts of the building were changed more dramatically. Walls were splashed with trendy purple or deep blue paint, and a parlor was turned into a prayer room with floor pillows and scented candles. A large Sunday school classroom was turned into a coffee bar and recreation room—now mostly for staff, since the congregation has long since outgrown it.

Emblazoned on that rec room wall is a quote from Stanley Hauerwas: "The work of Jesus was not a new set of ideals or principles for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love in its rituals and discipline. In that sense, the visible church is not to be the bearer of Christ's message, but to be the message." How many churches have a quote from Hauerwas on a wall?

The opening prayer on the Sunday I visited was written by Walter Brueggemann. The interest of Emergent churches in people like Hauerwas, Brueggemann, Miroslav Volf, Nancey Murphy and N. T. Wright indicates that while members may be sons and daughters of evangelicals or fundamentalists, they take their theological cues from mainline theologians.

Keel is drawn to theologians who articulate a post-Christendom perspective and who argue that Christians are most faithful when they are not seeking cultural or political power. Keel carries no weapons in the culture war, and he figures that his people, hardly stereotypical evangelicals, vote Democratic or Green as often as Republican. Recognizing that we live in a post-Christendom world means, for Keel, never assuming that his listeners have a basic knowledge of Christian thought, language or practice. He cites the late British missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, one of the first to describe the West as a new mission field: "How can this strange story of God made

man, of a crucified savior, of resurrection and new creation become credible? . . . I know of only one clue to the answering of that question, only one real hermeneutic of the gospel: congregations that believe it."

Sunday worship at JW reveals some of what Emergent means by calling itself postevangelical. The music is led, conventionally enough, by a rock band that plays loudly enough to shake the wooden pews. But this is not happy-clappy "Jesus is my boyfriend" music. It's much more edgy, closer to grunge than to praise-chorus music. (Says Keel: "Grunge is what happens when the children of divorce get guitars.") The lyrics, many written by worship minister Mike Crawford, lift up pain as well as praise: "Jesus full of grace, / the humble you adore. / This world's a hungry place, / with no justice for the poor. / Jesus full of peace, / yet our hearts so full of war. / We take our pruning hooks / we beat them into swords."

The songs are new, and the words are flashed up on a plasma screen by PowerPoint, but the language is as old as scripture. Most songs, in fact, are paraphrases of scripture. And as loud as the music is, the singing is louder. Andy Crouch of *Christianity Today*, who is critical of much of the Emergent movement, praises JW as "the best singing white church I've ever been to." JW's effort to make music participatory rather than performance-based struck a chord with Crouch, who also signaled his awareness that JW is rooted in its own particular neighborhood and could not be easily replicated elsewhere: "It made me want to move to Kansas City. Really."

Keel begins his sermon after the introductory music and prayer end. Few announcements or even greetings clutter the service. He offers questions he expects the congregation to answer. "I'm not just trying to be engaging," he says. "I really want to know what everyone else thinks." Regulars, who often mention Keel's preaching as a major reason for their attendance, remember times when he has taken his sermon in a different direction because of the feedback he's getting.

Keel's expository style reflects his evangelical heritage and his training at conservative Denver Seminary. He takes his listeners through an odd corner of 1 Samuel 4 in which the Israelites respond to defeat at the hands of the Philistines by fetching the Ark to ensure victory—after which they are defeated again, with far worse casualties. "Some passage, eh?" he jokes.

Keel observes that Israel treated the Ark as a totem, a magic object that would force God to give them success. “It reminds me of meaningless God-talk,” he says to appreciative nods. “This is my pet peeve—just ‘Godding’ everything to pretend you have control when you don’t.” He draws a lesson for his congregation: “We can’t assume that because God has blessed what we’ve done in the past here at Jacob’s Well that he will again. We serve a living God, and are hardly the same as we were a year or two ago.”

This embrace of change worries Emergent’s critics, who think that the movement’s style is just one more churchly fad. Keel worries about Emergent being a fad too, and he criticizes the recurrent search for techniques of church growth, well aware that churches that have followed other trends—whether the Alpha course or Purpose-Driven Life studies—are likely to try out aspects of the Emergent movement. He assails the notion that (as he wrote in an essay in *The Relevant Church*) “if only we can (re) discover x (fill-in-the-blank: prayer, fasting, worship, community, drama, service) and implement it, then the Church will have y (fill-in-the-blank: impact, relevance, meaning, validity, profile, etc.).” Many of Emergent’s leaders, including Keel, got their start in the Willow Creek–inspired Leadership Network, which they found to be a sort of factory geared to church growth rather than anything more authentically communal. Looking for a technique is “much easier, short-term, than living out the life of the gospel in community.”

Jacob’s Well reveals the theological and ecclesial fissures not only in evangelicalism, but in Emergent itself. Many in that group sound fed up with the church as a whole and make sport of bashing it. But Keel stresses, “I love the church. . . . Anyone wanting to manifest the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus must deal with and through the church, specifically the local church.”

God loves not only the church today, but the church through time. Keel makes spiritual retreats to a local Benedictine monastery where he has a spiritual director. JW celebrates communion at every gathering not as an afterthought, but as a response to the word and the climax of worship. Its people take no membership count because they envision something like a monastic rule of life—attracting fewer members but higher commitment. On its Web site (jacobswellchurch.org), instead of articulating its own statement of faith, JW cites the Apostles’ Creed.

Yet innovation is part of the atmosphere at JW because of its large community of artists and the artistic environment. Keel even talks about JW as an “artistic haven.”

There are so many musicians in the church that the members of the band behind Mike Crawford change every week. The prayer room doubles as a gallery, which hosts regular art shows and is part of a city program that brings art lovers—not usually a churchy crowd—into the professionally lit space. Art photographs adorn JW's Web site.

"Artists have a nose for propaganda," Keels says, and they often smell it on evangelicals. JW tries to make space for whatever art community members create and then design space or liturgy around it. This fits with Keel's and JW's theology of salvation: "What if instead of seeing salvation's story as one of creation-fall-redemption, we saw it as creation-incarnation–re-creation?" he wonders aloud.

Such exploratory questions about core Christian teachings reflect an Emergent trait that disturbs critics who see the bogeyman of theological liberalism at work. D. A. Carson has launched a book-length attack on the movement, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2005), and former Emergent leader Mark Driscoll and *Christianity Today* columnist Charles Colson have also inveighed against it. Their primary criticism is that Emergent is abandoning Christianity's claim to objective, universal truth.

It's true that Keel and others in Emergent avoid the language of objective truth. They believe that such language is defined by the categories of the Enlightenment, that there are different ways of reasoning, and that the church must make its claims to truth on a contested field without shouting in advance that others are wrong and it alone is right. Keel deplores the "bounded-set thinking" that such charges evidence—the urge to define "in" and "out" groups. He characterizes Emergent as pursuing "center-set thinking," in which Jesus is the center of a circle whose edges are fuzzy. "I see so many Christians with so much of their lives not in submission to Christ, and so many non-Christians with so much of their lives in submission to Christ."

Driscoll and others have argued that Emergent churches show little growth through conversion and merely recycle sheep within the fold. Keel responds to this charge by telling me about a Hindu student who began coming to Jacob's Well for the art and leaving before the service began, but then started staying just for the music, and finally stayed for the whole service. "If most evangelicals follow a pattern of believe-behave-belong, we reverse that pattern and make it belong-behave-believe," said Keel. "We say, 'Try on these clothes, take up these practices, and see what

happens.’”

Some aspects of JW—its post-Christendom political posture and its postliberal theological tone—are hardly unique. Even its effort at grunge worship and to be an artistic haven has imitators and precursors elsewhere. But Keel says, “I’d hate to think JW could be imitated elsewhere,” since, as he sees it, churches need to be “environmentalists”—to take the temperature of their particular place and serve it accordingly. Nevertheless, students at the three seminaries in the Kansas City area and other people interested in church plants are paying attention to JW (two study groups were visiting the night I attended).

Emergent members are often kidded for their body piercings and tattoos, but such displays simply reflect the demographic of these churches. “Twenty percent of people aged 20 to 50 have a tattoo,” Keel reports. He adds that tattoos are usually a marker for some experience of pain. Part of JW’s success is that it doesn’t hide from pain. Keel speaks regularly of his experience of his parents’ divorce, and about the consequences of drug and alcohol abuse and sexual experimentation. He talks about being “naked in the pulpit” (the title of an essay of his). This is not exhibitionism, he insists, but being authentic about one’s brokenness and ongoing need for healing.

Authenticity is a word one hears a lot at JW. Perhaps that (and a weekly Sunday evening service) is why JW has become a haven for a number of pastors, who come to the Sunday evening or a midweek service. “Pastors often feel they can’t be human with their own churches,” Keel laments as he shows me a thank-you card from a minister who said he had been ready to leave the ministry before encountering JW.

Another person who appreciates JW is Susan Cox-Johnson, a United Methodist district superintendent in Kansas City. She writes in the denominational publication *Circuit Rider* of how Broadway UMC had once been the largest church in its conference, largely because of the success of a Sunday school ministry. Under JW’s inspiration she started a coffee house in the Broadway church, whose congregation is now graying.

Cox-Johnson believes that the Emergent movement can help mainline churches reach out by reminding them of their own neglected resources, such as the Methodist emphasis on holy friendship, which these days can be nurtured in coffee shops.

Emergent types are also kidded for their love of “cool”—their trendy hair and their up-to-the-minute pop-culture references. In this case, the shoe fits. In his sermon Keel made a reference to a movie, *Snakes on a Plane*, which had yet to open but was getting a lot of buzz on the Internet. He admits on his blog, “I love Apple products so much. . . . My wife has completely given up making photo albums. We take gads of digital pics and then load them onto iPhoto. From there I either import them into iMovie and burn a slide show through iDVD, or I make a slide show right in iPhoto, upload it onto my iDisk, then connect it to my Mac homepage for viewing. . . . If you want a sample of what I’m talking about, click here.”

Keel grew up as something of a church mutt, spending time with Methodists, Presbyterians, charismatics and Jesus People. He laments the day that Roanoke Presbyterian folded and sold JW the building. Worshiping with the Presbyterians, he says tenderly, “was like worshiping with our grandmothers.”

Perhaps Keel’s positive interaction with mainline churches explains his openness to things catholic and ecumenical. He is not tempted to speak as though Emergent is inventing the wheel, as many of his colleagues do, when it places women in leadership roles or advocates for social justice. Though he has his doubts about whether Emergent can “work” in the structures of a denomination—he says he was never tempted by the “golden handcuffs” of church-plant funding—he values interaction with mainline pastors such as Cox-Johnson. Emergent as a movement has never sought to be a brand, much less a new denomination, but instead is a friendship network among members of several church bodies.

As one looks at the 20-somethings and 30-somethings involved at JW, it seems as though Gen-Xers are reacting to their parents of the Me generation by rebuilding the structures that their parents tore down, literally moving into a neighborhood and church like the ones in which their grandparents lived and worshiped. In JW’s case, the emphasis is on the importance of the local, of community, of friendship. Keel writes, “I belong to these people, and they belong to me. Together we belong to Jesus. It doesn’t stop there: because we belong to Jesus, we belong to other communities of people who belong to Jesus”—thus enunciating an ecclesiology that closely reflects John’s Gospel.

JW has been praised for putting into practice the emphasis on community and on the kind of post-Christendom, mission-oriented faith that McLaren, Newbigin and others have written about. The people I talked to at JW had never heard of Emergent or of McLaren. They’re just going to church with their friends, unaware that their

congregation is a model for how to be “post” many things (postevangelical, postliberal, post conservative, postmodern) precisely by sinking its roots deeper into the local, the particular and the church catholic.