

Just What Is This Thing Called 'The Emerging Church'?

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Will it, in fact, address the decreasing involvement of young people in many churches - the problems of the drop-out rate among churchgoing young people from 12 to 30, and of an increasing sense of alienation among both young and old?

AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND (ANS) -- The emerging church is believed by some to be the most important development of the decade in Western Christianity.

It is primarily an attempt to counter the inroads that postmodernism has made into faith and church attendance.

Churches which identify themselves as emerging are diverse. Some have distanced themselves from both the mindset of traditional denominations and contemporary "seeker" models of church, while others identify with ancient traditions.

Some emerging congregations grow within an existing church, while others are new church plants that retain their denominational affiliation. There are also some significant differences between the United States and other Western countries such as New Zealand, Britain and Australia.

Any attempt to pin down a definition of "emerging church", therefore, is daunting. One of the acknowledged worldwide leaders, Brian McLaren, agrees it presents a problem.

Mr. McLaren has been in New Zealand to take seminars in Auckland, Palmerston North and Christchurch. He told Challenge Weekly that one of the ironies is that a lot of the people associated with it never use the term "emerging church".

"First, part of what's needed is to stop talking about the Church so much. One of the central ideas that a lot of us are engaging with is the idea of the kingdom of God at the heart of Jesus' message.

"When we keep talking about church functions, church meetings, how we do church, we keep postponing the needed conversation about the kingdom of God, which in a way is about the mission of the Church beyond itself.

"Also, the idea of the emerging church, with the emphasis on the, suggests that this a model or a style, and whatever this thing is it has so many different forms and shapes there's not really one style."

Mr. McLaren prefers to use the term "emergent conversation", because he says that for those involved it is a theological conversation about Gospel and culture – "about our understanding of the gospel related to mission, some fresh and exciting engagement with scripture".

"Many of us feel we're in a transition period where the world in general is emerging from modernity, from the Enlightenment, from colonialism, from the industrial era. People don't know what to call this emerging culture, so they use words like 'post-colonial', 'post-Enlightenment', some would say 'post-Christendom'.

One of the primary aims is to address the decreasing involvement of young people in many churches. Mr. McLaren says there are both the problem of the drop-out among churchgoing young people from 12 to 30, and the problem of an increasing sense of alienation among both young and old.

“So a lot of us are asking: why aren’t our conventional forms of Christian faith working for people? And what do we need to do about that?”

What is being done is reflection, conversation and experimentation on many levels - on the level of theology, worship, spiritual formation, mission, social engagement.

“At all these levels there’s a lot of fresh thinking. But it’s at a very early stage, and that’s one of the reasons it’s hard to define, because in many cases we’re asking questions but have not come up with good answers. In other areas we’re making some modest discoveries and progress.”

Some of the experimentation has included what looks rather like a New Age form of spirituality, crudely identified as involving more candles than theology. But Mr. McLaren says very firmly that the Gospel of Jesus and the kingdom of God must remain the dominant theology.

“I think the best book that has been written on this whole thing so far is by a British theologian, Eddie Gibbs, and an American named Ryan Bolger, who co-authored a book called *The Emerging Churches*.

“They came up with nine characteristics. The number one was a centring on Jesus Christ and his message of the kingdom of God. Why is it that the message of the kingdom of God was central for Jesus, and somewhat peripheral for a lot of Christians today? There is a great interest in rediscovering what Jesus meant by the phrase, and what that means for us today.

“It’s true there has been a lot of criticism. And, of course, when a group like this is raising very deep questions, such as do we have the Gospel right? – and you don’t get much deeper than that – people who feel we do have it right already have to criticise what we’re doing.

“And we have to listen, because maybe they’re right. So for people who feel, for example, that the Westminster Confession perfectly contains Christian theology the kind of conversation we’re having is a waste of time.

“But for people who feel that the Westminster Confession arose at a certain time, addressed certain concerns of that time, then we have to be as faithful to our time as the framers of the confession were to their time.

“In the US you see a very strong polarisation, where the religious right has had a strong monologue, and it’s been a kind of retreat, a feeling that the good old days are back in the 1940s or 50s or 70s.

“One of the effects of this emerging church conversation is a sense of hope and enthusiasm about the future and the need to engage, and less of a feeling of defeatism and retreat and nostalgia.”

Mr. McLaren acknowledges that there is a huge danger that the movement will appeal mainly to those who have been hurt or turned off by churches.

“There are a lot of people who feel damaged by the existing Church. They feel that it didn’t work for them, they feel that it used them, it didn’t have room for their questions, that it put a coercive pressure on them.

“Those people are hurt and angry, and they have to express that, they have to process it and get through it. But that kind of hurt and anger can easily be toxic. It’s not easy to help people process that kind of stuff and not get stuck in it.

“That’s one of the real challenges I see when I travel. I see it in Britain, I felt it in Australia and New Zealand; it’s certainly an issue in the States.

“Another problem is that many people my age and older – I’m 50 this year – have watched their children and grandchildren completely leave the Church and the Christian faith, and these children and grandchildren need some way to reconnect with God.

“We’re grappling with these issues, and we’re not coming up with solutions fast enough. But it’s a little like pregnancy - it can’t be rushed.

“But one of the great challenges is that we can be preoccupied with the disaffected, and miss the challenge to connect also with people who are more unchurched than dechurched.

“That group of people is increasing rapidly across the West. There are more and more people two or three generations removed from any active Christian life.”

Mr. McLaren says there is equally the danger of something like this degenerating into a fad.

“I had an interesting conversation with three pastors from Palmerston North, and they said how discouraging it is to have a lot of these fads come in from the US, and everyone jumps on the bandwagon, goes to the conferences, spends the money, tries the programme and then there is this feeling after it is all over that it didn’t really change anything.

“And they made an insightful comment, that what New Zealand really needs is its own confidence that it doesn’t need to borrow something from somebody else, but that people here have the creativity to address their own context.

“This is one of the reasons I don’t like the term ‘emerging church’. That feeds into the idea that it’s an imported programme. The idea of a conversation that New Zealanders play an active role in, but a conversation that takes place increasingly globally, which is easier to do because of travel and the internet, is a much more hopeful way to see it.”

Among the strengths of the movement is a resurgence of interest in the arts that, Mr. McLaren says, is unprecedented in his lifetime.

“There’s also a real interest in spiritual formation that is not about easy answers but is about going deep. For example, in the US last month, we have been sponsoring what we call ‘theological conversations’ where we invite people to spend two days with a leading theologian, who does not have to prepare any lectures.

“Everyone who comes agrees to read two or three books pre-selected by this theologian and then we just have discussion for a couple of days. We opened this up for 100 people, and the spaces were filled within six hours. We kept expanding it, eventually to 300 people, and that filled up as well.

“That to me is a wonderful thing, when you have people – some pastors, but many lay people, too – to whom it matters so much that they want to spend two days just talking theology.”

Some critics believe that those involved in the conversation are saying that traditional denominations are outdated or irrelevant. Mr. McLaren himself does not subscribe to that.

“What we need is not to dismantle all the denominations and go and start new things. I wish we could have a both-and approach, because there are great things conserved in each of these denominations.

“And I think there are great treasures the denominations can share with each other – they don’t have to be proprietary of their strengths.

“For example, Anglicans have a great strength in their liturgy. There’s no reason why the Baptists couldn’t borrow from that. The Baptists have a great strength in mission and courageous innovation, and calling people to commitment and conversion. That’s a strength a lot of Anglicans would admit they do not have.

“You get to the point where there’s the possibility of a really constructive sharing. That’s what a lot of us are hopeful about.”

Whether denominations become irrelevant will depend on the denominational leaders.

“I’m very impressed. I meet a lot of denominational leaders around the world and there are a lot of wonderful and wise people leading our denominations. These people understand the problems and challenges, they understand the obstacles to addressing those challenges, and many I have met are deeply godly people who are trying to move forward with wisdom, faith and courage. I think if our denominations respond wisely, they have a great future.

“But I also think that some get into a ‘circle the wagons’ or defeatist mentality, where they are held hostage by certain segments of their constituency, and often the worst cases are where the entrenched and cautious people frighten away the more innovative and creative people.

“That’s a great loss, when a community scares away its creative and adventurous people. For those groups, I think there will be problems.

“But one of the great blessings is that God can do anything, and even though you might drive away one generation of creative people, if you can hang on long enough another generation might grow up, and the second time round we might be ready to listen.”

Mr. McLaren says the move to relate to post-modern culture might be more advanced in the West, but it will be only a matter of time before it spreads.

“I have spent a good bit of time in Latin America and Africa, and I will be in Asia a good bit in the next year, and I am told by a lot of people in these places that they see similar problems brewing in their world.

“There is a certain sense that the diseases of modernity and post-modernity have a way of spreading to the global south.”

Mr. McLaren certainly believes that a positive way forward will be developed.

"I have been a pastor for 24 years and I am not naïve about the problems of the Church, but I am completely confident in the good news of Jesus. There is nobody else who gives me hope other than Jesus, so as long as we keep drawing from that resource I am hopeful."

From inquiries made by Challenge Weekly, it would appear that the questions and ideas promoted by those in the emerging church network are meeting with less suspicion in New Zealand.

The pastor of Spreydon Baptist Church, Murray Robertson, says that before attending the Christchurch seminar his picture of the emerging church had been of small niche market congregations aimed at alternative lifestylers.

"But I was greatly impressed at McLaren, at his self-deprecating approach as an American, and at the bigness of his vision. I had a good talk with him and my impression is that most of the opposition to him in the US comes because he is not a right-wing, Republican-voting, fundy.

"I think a lot of the criticism of the emerging church has to be seen in the context of the religious scene in the US. I might be over-simplifying things, but opposition by Americans to other Americans seems to come from the nature of their polarised society, where they are not very good at listening to each other.

"A lot of churches are stridently right-wing, or believe that their way of doing things is the only way. These churches find it hard to accommodate different ideas.

"The same situation does not apply in New Zealand, and many churches here are in fact already doing what Brian McLaren is advocating. I visited their church website and saw a church that looked remarkably like Spreydon."

Peter Lineham, associate professor of history at Massey University's Albany campus, said the emergent church is grappling with some deep issues in Western Christianity.

Professor Lineham agrees with Murray Robertson that there has been sharp criticism of the emergent church from some conservative evangelicals.

He says some who have made vicious attacks on the movement have not understood the mission heart that underlies it, and some of that criticism is based on not understanding the longing for an expression of Christianity that connects with our culture.

"That's the great genuineness of what Brian McLaren is speaking about. He is speaking of a real shift in our culture and how to express Christianity, and he's trying to meet that expression.

"He's certainly had a huge impact in his church in the States, and one can really respect that, even though he's going to have to choose which door he's going to go through out of the options he's offering.

"Like all movements, it's a bit flawed. There's a lot in the McLaren approach which is nebulous. What precisely is the 'new kind of Christian' that he talks about (in his book *A Generous Christian*)? It leaves me a little baffled."

Tim Cooper – a lecturer in church history at Otago University – also sees churches in this country well on the way that McLaren points to. As a former church director of LifeSwitch Church in the Hutt Valley, he was responsible for facilitating changes to meet the 21st century. He says the fact that it has developed spontaneously here shows it is an important movement.

"I think it's a real issue for New Zealand churches to work through, how they make the experience of church meaningful to a new generation. The older modes of church may not be so meaningful any more because they were suited to the modern perspective.

"There is a real shift from modernism to post-modernism, which we have to engage with."

But Mr. Cooper warns that churches need to beware that while finding ways to relate to postmodern culture, they don't become too enculturated. He is unhappy with one of the early books written by McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, which appeared to rely more on post-modern thinking than the Bible to resolve problems.

"If churches abandon the Bible as the basis for what they doing, that's tricky. The weakness of postmodernism is: what do you pin it on? What basis is there? Once you take out the idea of objective truth, what is left?

"I strongly believe that churches need to engage with post-modern thinking, but post-modernism may be passing, and it may pass more quickly than you think, because people will find in the end it's not a philosophy you can live by. Who knows what will succeed it, but perhaps it will be a return to absolute values.

"Therefore, while we should pay attention, we don't necessarily have to buy into it. Nonetheless, churches need to pay attention. Things are rapidly changing, and if we're 10 years behind we're a long way behind. We've got to connect somehow," Mr. Cooper said.