



BEYOND AUGSBURG

## A PRIMER ON THE EMERGING CHURCH

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What are the common features of the following communities: a self-named “abbey” without a building that meets in the homes of its congregants<sup>1</sup>; an old church in Minneapolis with a retooled sanctuary consisting of couches placed in concentric circles<sup>2</sup>; and a community of believers and atheists alike who gather in a pub in Belfast, Northern Ireland<sup>3</sup>? They are all instances of the “emerging church,” a broad ecclesiological experiment by people from across the socioeconomic board looking for new ways to proclaim the gospel and serve the world.

The emerging church (EC) is not a monolithic structure but more like a community of communities moving in and out of life together. Some are looking for alternative church structures; some want no structure at all; yet somehow they all manage to hang together. The American EC is generally thought to have begun in 1998 or 1999 with a gathering of Christian leaders who had found each other online or through personal relationships and came together to form the Emerging Leaders Network. This network later became the Emergent Village, and from that base several other networks and idioms have come and gone (flexibility and adaptability are key features of the EC!). There are many authors and speakers who more or less typify the emergent conversation: Phyllis Tickle, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, and Nathan Frambach. The leadership structure of these networks try to downplay their magisterial authority, but even so, inevitably some of them end up with a kind of “rock star” reputation within the movement.

The EC is experimental in essence. There is a desire to try new things or come at old questions in new or fresh ways. They generally are seeking an ecclesiological third way between what is seen as denominational staleness on the one hand and non-denominational idolatry of quantity over quality on the other. Regarding the former, Lutherans know by now, from their declining numbers if nothing else, that the usual denominational battles don’t do much

to attract folks looking for a community of believers. That’s where the “emerging church”<sup>4</sup> comes in.

The EC is not so much anti-*institutional* as it is anti-*useless* institutions. Denominational identity is of little interest. Indeed, for some, attaching a brand marker to their community would defeat the purpose. Denominationalism is seen as an excuse to fight at the expense of all the good work to be done in the world. EC people want to be part of what God is up to now, not stuck in a denomination or other “secondary” source.

It is important to note that the EC is not a worship style, as other anti-denominational movements have been. An established congregation can’t add an “emerging” worship service with black curtains and candles (the kind of “edgy” decoration often seen in EC churches), since

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the chief point is an alternate ecclesial structure. Most EC leaders strive to avoid relativism, although the rejection of historic squabbles might seem to indicate a tendency in that direction. And the EC is not confined to a particular demographic. It is multi-generational, multi-class, and fairly diverse. People engaged in the communities within the EC movement would most likely agree that their appeal is *psychographic* rather than demographic. That is why it is hard to paint the EC with a broad brush. Many of these communities have formed around an idea, or in reaction to a particular experience of God or the church, that pushed them from one world into the other. Others simply desire to be connected to other people in more life-giving or meaningful or authentic ways than they have found elsewhere.

As a Lutheran pastor, I have found myself drawn to the folks in the EC and have learned that there is much we can offer each other. At the very least, the emerging church communities can remind us, as Lutherans, what it means to be a reforming movement within the church catholic. In turn, to these communities we can offer the best of what we have learned over the past centuries. Together we can share our curiosity over what God might be up to in the

meeting of our churches today. Just such curiosity has led me to discover the following points of entry into conversation with the EC.

#### *Conversation Points*

**Justification** Lutheran rootedness in the theology of justification will prove helpful in the EC conversation, particularly around the issue of *right belief*. Many EC Christians find their congregations issuing “Statements of Belief.” Such statements lay out what every single person in the congregation is supposed to believe. If you agree, you are in; if not, then move along. Needless to say, the result is an incredibly simplistic and false way of gathering a church—not to mention recreating the conditions that post-denominationalism was supposed to avoid! Often I am asked: “How in the world can each and every person in a congregation agree 100% with every word in a statement of belief, and what does that have to do with faith anyway?”

The theology around justification by faith creates space for conversation and worship in a community that agrees on the major things (Jesus Christ as savior, his atoning death, and so forth) but disagrees about the minor things (worship style, just how exactly the atonement works, etc.). Justification by grace tells us that it is not up to us to figure it all out, but to trust in the promise that God *has* figured it all out. The end of the story has been written, it is no mystery, it’s right there for you and me. That does not mean we have to give up asking questions or putting truth claims out there to be tested, but it does demand of us humility and trust, two things sorely lacking in today’s contemporary Christian culture, no matter what the affiliation.

Related to justification is the concept of *adiaphora*, succinctly described in the Augsburg Confession, article VII:

For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and

the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, there are primary things and there are secondary things. A congregationally-issued Statement of Belief needs a careful and considered distinction between the primary and secondary, or the result will be nothing but division.

**Confession and Absolution** After many conversations with people engaged in the EC, I came to realize that many of its adherents have been hurt or broken by someone associated with “The Church.” In this painful experience, they discovered that sometimes human beings labor under their own authority disguised as the authority of God. As a result, these wounded people wonder what kind of God is behind such a church, or if there really is a God at all; they leave the church entirely to be safe. People wrestling with this “God and faith” thing have lost the one place that should have been safe for them to explore their questions. The EC embraces displaced or excluded people who have never been a part of a community that celebrates confession and absolution. They have never heard that God forgives generously and invites us to reconciliation; they have never been asked to forgive those who have hurt them; and they have never heard forgiveness proclaimed to them personally, either. Church has always been about getting it right, never about getting forgiven.

The critical edge of EC embodies a theology of the cross, condemning our sin in the church and challenging us to conform our lives more and more to Christ’s. But it has a tendency to stay at the cross, stuck in an endless self-improvement project, ignoring the joy of Easter. There is no place yet in the EC to hear and believe the words: “You are forgiven in the name of Christ.” A Lutheran sense of being freed to serve the other might offer a grace-oriented,

joyful direction to these experiments.

**Predestination** Much has been written, fought over, condemned, misused, and abused regarding the doctrine of predestination. Luther and the reformers didn’t actually differ all that much from Rome on the subject. It has come around again, though, as a hornet’s nest for the EC. Many of the leaders in the movement have been accused of heresy by established evangelicals. This despite the fact that the reformers remind us that the doctrine of predestination does not exist to bring dissension to the church, but rather as an article of comfort “when properly treated.” Yet both EC and evangelical theologians are continually compelled to ask who is in and who is out, and then whether God decides who will believe and who won’t.

As Lutherans know from the Formula of Concord, predestination “is concerned only with the pious children of God in whom He is well pleased. It is a cause of their salvation, for He alone brings it about.”<sup>6</sup> Everything we need to know about God’s salvation of humankind is to be found in the Scriptures; trying to figure out anything beyond it the sinful human effort to *be* God.

This understanding of predestination can help the EC avoid the “ditches” of contemporary Christian culture, where either congregations condemn nonbelievers to the pits of hell, using doctrine as a cattle-prod to force a confession of faith, or a helpless practical vote for relativism causes the gospel to lose its edge altogether.

**Teaching the Faith** The idea of catechism has been around as long as the Bible: Paul speaks of *κατηχέω* in Galatians 6:6. Luther wrote his Small Catechism in 1529 upon realizing that “[t]he common people... have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfit for teaching.”<sup>7</sup> The EC tendency is to dismiss this foundational resource just because the “brand name” of

Luther is attached to it. But as a starting point for new Christians, as a movement of heart and mind from law to gospel to life of faith, it can't be matched. Luther's constant question "What is this?" matches the seeker's efforts to understand and deepens the new convert's faith.

**Law and Gospel** Lutherans are not big theological fans of the law; it makes us think of Big Brother and nasty church control, and we are glad to dismiss fire-and-brimstone preachers. But the EC has managed to make the law cool and relevant to a new generation of churchgoers. The fire and brimstone is gone, but in its place has come the "new monasticism,"<sup>8</sup> "organic community,"<sup>9</sup> and so on. Though all these things have good, gospel-centered inspiration behind them, there's also a sense in which one moralism has simply replaced another. Under the EC banner you find just another way to get to heaven on your own, with Jesus left at the side of the road unneeded, unused, at best cheering (or maybe nagging) us on!

The question is what, to the EC, is the "problem"? If the answer is "free will," then the EC culture will have little choice but to try and seduce human wills into making moral choices. This is a stark contrast to the Lutheran liturgical confession: "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." If the problem is, on the other hand, not free will but sin, death, and the power of the devil, then a very different congregational life will "emerge." The question for us would be: can unrooted communities have a sense of the whole rhythm of life, or is this exactly where they will fall into the ditch of "playing church"? In other words, is the EC just doing the parts of church they like while ignoring those that might become onerous, boring, or old-fashioned? For instance, I have never seen a funeral performed in one of these communities; I am curious to see how the enormity of death would be handled in the EC setting.

There are countless bands of people gathering at or outside the fringes of our congregations, thirsty for rich theological conversations and lives shared together. Some have theologically trained self-identified leaders, but as a rule they are not rooted in any deeper or wider community. Too often the result is like the kingship of Saul: off to a good start that ends in disaster. Or an EC might have no formal leadership at all, leaving the people adrift and susceptible to every "wind of doctrine."

What if a Lutheran congregation or consortium of congregations came together to do some research and planning with these communities on the fringe of our common life? It would be a truly missionary, ecumenical, and evangelical endeavor to begin a relationship between established worshipping communities and those who have not found a way in. And it would break up our own Lutheran insularity and usual sets of questions and answers to hear some fresh perspectives on being an American Christian in the twenty-first century.

At a recent Minneapolis Area Synod ministerium around the topic of the ELCA's Book of Faith initiative, we gathered a panel of people who don't study the Bible, and haven't found a way to engage the Word in their daily lives, yet consider themselves faithful people. The gathered pastors and rostered leaders wanted to know, "What are the barriers to regular Bible study?" The answers were myriad, but the conversation itself was the most interesting to me: it was one of the most honest and gratifying I have experienced at a synod gathering. It is exactly these kinds of conversations that are happening all the time in the EC. The Lutheran church has much to offer them, but we also have a lot to learn from their openness, curiosity, and creativity.

Practically speaking, congregations with more than one pastor might

consider sending the outreach pastor as a kind of missionary to those communities. The goal would not be assimilation of "them" into "us" but an establishing of relationships. Consortiums of smaller congregations could staff a position like this as well, and in either case must be prepared to welcome the exploratory visits and questions of the emerging partner.

We send missionaries far across the globe, while our evangelism committees are usually just left to prepare Sunday coffee and staff the welcome center. Both of these, for all their importance, neglect the many fruitful opportunities awaiting us locally. Not only personally but also ecclesiastically, God asks us to see of Jesus Christ in the face of the stranger. *LF*

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*Notes*

1. The Church of the Apostles in Seattle, Washington.
2. Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
3. Ikon in Belfast, Northern Ireland.
4. There have been many scholarly articles and books written about the emerging church movement. One of the best journal articles I have seen to date is F. LeRon Shults, "Reforming Ecclesiology in Emerging Churches," *Theology Today* 65 (2009): 425-438. The book that best helped me find a way into this whole conversation was by Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster: Paraclete, 2006).
5. *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 32 [hereafter cited as BC].
6. Formula of Concord, Epitome, article XI, in BC 495.
7. "Preface," Small Catechism, in BC 338.
8. The "new monasticism" is a communities of communities made up of individuals who have come together to live in common life, typically under some kind of rule, though not usually the traditional ones of Christian tradition, and without the usual vows.
9. "Organic community" is a phrase used by those who have come together to be some kind of church presence but move away from programs or ministries. The idea is to create an environment where new communities might spontaneously appear.