

Emerging Church?

New thinking about the church in Europe in the 21st century



Author: Richard Tiplady, British Director, European Christian Mission.

A movement of new thinking and practices regarding the shape of the church in the West has well and truly 'emerged'. It is a diverse and fluid movement, still taking and changing shape, one which has been given a variety of names – “missional church” and “mission-shaped church” are but two, although the phrase used in the title of this short paper, “emerging church”, is the one most widely in use.

Why “emerging”? Because the ideas and practices are nowhere near fully-formed, it is imprecise (allowing room for experimentation and avoiding the restrictions of tight definitions), and because “emerging church” ideas and experiments have sprung up or ‘emerged’ in a variety of different contexts, more-or-less spontaneously and simultaneously.

As a movement, it has its roots in the northern/western European cultural sphere, but not just the Anglo-Saxon one. While “emerging church” ideas and practices are present in the UK and USA, they also in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, and significant early practitioners and thinkers ‘emerged’ in Australia and spread elsewhere. In fact, it’s probably wrong to describe it as a movement; it’s not that coherent. “Emerging church” has ‘emerged’ through the confluence of different social, missiological, theological and ecclesiological currents, which are outlined below in turn.

Currents that combine in ‘emerging church’

1. Changing cultural, religious and social realities in Europe

“Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures” (Gibbs and Bolger, p44). This is a key assumption behind “emerging church”. Just as the ‘gathered congregation’ form of the church emerged most definitively in the C18-C19, when the parish system proved inadequate to service the spiritual needs of urban industrial Europe, so new forms of the church will be needed to reach post-industrial, post-modern European people.

“Emerging church” tries to avoid the secular/spiritual divide imposed on the Christian faith by the Enlightenment, emphasising church as the people of God, not a place to meet. If there is no secular/spiritual divide, then there can be no ‘holy’ or ‘profane’ places. Churches are being intentionally planted in cafés, pubs and in houses, not just in special buildings.

“In Christendom, the Sunday meeting was the centre of corporate spiritual expression for the community. In a post-Christendom context, a church-meeting focus is no longer indigenous to the culture or necessary to be faithful to the gospel. Instead, the practice of community foundation itself is more central than the church meeting” (Gibbs and Bolger, p44).

2. New approaches to missionary outreach in Europe

Michael Moynagh describes “emerging church” as a mindset rather than a model, a way of thinking about church, rather than simply a way of doing church. This mindset is “we’ll come to you”, not “you come to us”. This has also been contrasted as “incarnational” v “attractional”, the latter being the more familiar mode of church (i.e. bringing people along to the church building or meeting place). In the “incarnational” approach, we model ourselves

on the example of Jesus by going among people and embodying the life of the Spirit in their midst. This is central to “emerging church” ideas about evangelism – existing forms of Christian worship and community do not attract outsiders (and may even repel them). There should be no offence except the cross of Christ.

3. A renewed emphasis on the kingdom of God (the in-breaking reign of God)

A “kingdom of God” emphasis is central for many emerging church writers. Mark Scandrette of ReIMAGINE in San Francisco said about his attempts to set up a Gen-X church, “We got the questions wrong. We started out thinking about what form the church should take, as opposed to what the life of Jesus means in this time and place. Now, instead of being preoccupied with new forms of church, we focus on seeking the kingdom as the people of God”. The in-breaking kingdom of God scandalizes the wealthy, the comfortable and the religious, and lifts up in the outcast, the immoral and the rejected. At least, it did in Jesus’ day, so why should we expect it to be any different now?

4. Not “what is the church?”, but “what is the church for?”

The quote from Scandrette above shows that “emerging church” is therefore as much about the purpose of the church as it is about the shape of the church. Form should follow function. Emerging church challenges us to rethink our fundamental assumptions about what it means to “be the church” as well as how we “do church”. Only thereafter should we create new wineskins, doing things in an entirely new way, for the sake of the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ in Europe. For example, Latin American missiologist Orlando Costas described church-planting as “penultimate”, i.e. it is not the goal and purpose of mission. The purpose of church-planting is to create living communities of Christians that will work for personal and social transformation in their locality. If this is true, then how does this affect the way we plant churches?

Examples to illustrate

The above elements may describe the ethos and driving forces behind “emerging church”, but missionaries, church leaders and others rightly ask, “OK, so what does it look like?”. Two examples, with their websites for further information, are given below:

Urban Expression www.urbanexpression.org.uk

A church-planting enterprise that began in the East End of London (which is urban, deprived, socially and ethnically very mixed, multicultural and multireligious) and now also active in Glasgow. They don’t always look like church, and their involvement with their local communities’ needs is very deep. Most or all members of Urban Expression are evangelical, but they don’t have a statement of faith – they are united by what they call their “Core Convictions” which incorporates:

- their Mission Statement (“Urban Expression is an urban mission agency that recruits, equips, deploys and networks self-financing teams pioneering creative and relevant expressions of the Christian church in under-churched areas of the inner city”)
- their Values (relationship, creativity and humility)
- their Commitments (e.g. “We are committed to following God on the margins and in the gaps, expecting to discover God at work among powerless people and in places

of weakness” and “We are committed to being Jesus-centred in our view of the Bible, our understanding of mission and all aspects of discipleship”)

The Crowded House www.thecrowdedhouse.org

The Crowded House is a network of missional communities in Sheffield and Loughborough with a commitment to church planting. Their website states that “most of our churches meet in homes. We want to offer a place of belonging. We are committed to *mission through community* (we believe that the life of the Christian family is a powerful apologetic for the gospel) and *communities in mission* (we want to be congregations focused on the gospel and church planting)”. The following excerpt from their website illustrates their approach:

At university someone had tried to get Patrick along to church. What a joke! But was he at church now? He wasn't sure. It had started when a colleague asked him round for a meal. He was impressed by how Simon and the other people in his house all got on with one another. They'd got talking about life and stuff and they'd invited him to come round again on Sunday. Simon had suggested he come round in time to watch the football. When others arrived later in the afternoon they had all eaten together. They were a real hotch-potch of people, but Patrick enjoyed the banter. After the meal they had read from the Bible and discussed what it meant. No-one seemed to mind his questions. Now some were playing a board game. A family with young children had just left. A couple seemed to be praying in the kitchen. Maybe this was church. Maybe it wasn't. Whatever it was, Patrick felt strangely at home.

A few questions

“Emerging church” is not a panacea for the challenges facing the church in Europe today. But as an ethos, an idea and a movement, it offers us much to consider.

How then should we learn from “emerging church”? How can we participate in the discussions, understand the experiments, learn from the mistakes and success of others, and incorporate them into our own mission strategies and practices? In addition, can we encourage and resource our missionaries with these ideas and practices, and can we contribute to and support the work of others without trying to make it our own?

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the ‘Voice your comments’ form on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) website (www.redcliffe.org/encounters). You may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) discussion board.