

# **Lessons in the Bubbling Edges**

**THE EMERGING CHURCH IN A NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT**

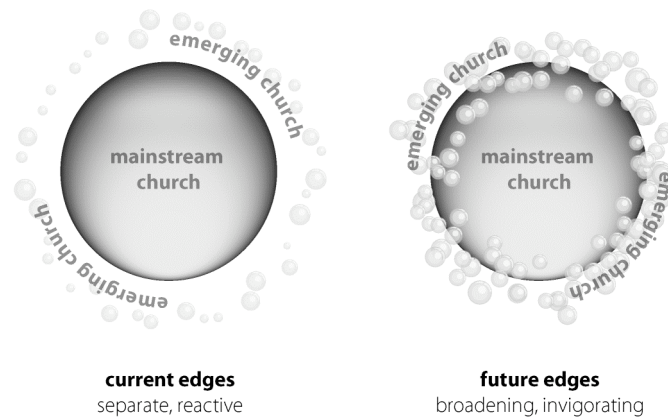
A semi-narrative essay by Stu McGregor, 10 July 2006.  
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## introduction

The Emerging Church as an identifiable movement is difficult to pin down simply because a one of the features is a resistance to the idea of unilateral doctrinal propositions.<sup>1</sup> Most of the information about the Emerging Church<sup>2</sup> is not found in books, but on the web, in blogs, podcasts and in .PDF formats creating a vibrant, free, dynamic and fluid interchange of ideas. It seems that no sooner does one get a general feeling for formulating their basic tenets, then another blog post will update or shift the ideas in another direction. Books on the Emerging Church seem to be out of date the minute they're released. As a result this paper is only ever going to be a small voice in this conversation and in that sense to summarise other people's ideas according to books is not only misrepresentative but possibly unhelpful.

In spite of the critics, we cannot deny our experiences of connection with God and community. For people like myself who were scarred by the evangelical model where church involvement equalled faith, it was an important place for healing and so I approach this topic acknowledging this bias up front. In all honesty, to engage with the emerging phenomenon on a purely abstracted academic level is somewhat unhelpful because this is about stories that have deeply impacted people. It's personal. And it's important.

The question this essay is trying to answer is fundamentally, can we do Emerging Church in New Zealand? I want to demonstrate that the answer is 'yes' but only if the Emerging Church shifts some of it's thinking to form a mutual embrace of the insitutional church. The image I have in mind is that of the Emerging Church being the bubbling edges of this mainstream mass as in the diagram below:



**Figure 1.** The edges of the Bride of Christ.

It's the interaction with the mainstream that not only will the Emerging Church invigorate, but it will in turn be invigorated by. This is I think a constructive future for the next century church in New Zealand. In Baptist circles we are already seeing the beginnings of this with

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<sup>1</sup> see [http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2006/05/doctrinal\\_state.html](http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2006/05/doctrinal_state.html)

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jones likes the idea of combining missional with the word emerging to create "emerging-missional" church expressions but for simplicity I would like to let emerging also encompass the idea of missional.  
[http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/02/what\\_i\\_mean\\_whe.html](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/02/what_i_mean_whe.html)

emerging vernacular becoming part of the Baptist Union Consultancy goals for 2006.<sup>3</sup>

In order for this to happen, we need to look at the history of the movement, its influences and its strengths and weaknesses. We will then consider how this partnership might take place.

## a brief history of Emerging Church

The Emerging Church is still in its infancy, a fact acknowledged through the name emergent which is used to describe the new growth on the forest floor which is renewing and participating in the life of the forest.<sup>4</sup> Andrew Jones points out that the word ‘Emergent’<sup>5</sup> as it is used in ‘emergent theory’, is a name given to the phenomenon where ‘new organizational structures progress from low-level chaos to higher level sophistication without a hierarchical command structure.’<sup>6</sup> The Emerging Church, therefore, is constantly in process, redefining and reshaping, autonomous and constrained by its own DNA yet with the flexibility to adapt to its own environment. The word *organic* fittingly provides the working metaphor for Emerging Church ontology. Jones outlines a neat and concise history of the global Emerging Church phenomenon which ranges from Japan, Indonesia through to Germany, Chile and tracks back 40 years in some places.<sup>7</sup>

The question ‘What is the emergent church?’ has been the topic of many recent blogs. Mark Ostreicher (ysmarko),<sup>8</sup> Dan Kimball<sup>9</sup>, Brian McLaren Andrew Jones<sup>10</sup> (Tall Skinny Kiwi) and Doug Pagitt<sup>11</sup>, have all made explorations into this. It seems the term began its usage in the states in 1996 when Leadership Network held a conference that had as its tagline, “Advance Scouts for The Emerging Church”, though as I’ve already mentioned, alt.worship was well in operation and the coining of ‘Emerging Church’ is a vernacular phenomenon that has gained currency since around 2003 when Kimball published a book by that title.

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<sup>3</sup> Case in point is Lindsay Jones’ “vitamin e” December 2005, where he states that “For 2006 I am seeking to add resource persons who can help our churches in the areas of:

- Missional church thinking
- Market place/Faith at Work
- Emergent congregations and church models
- Community transformation
- Straight forward evangelism.”

<http://www.baptist.org.nz/default.asp?id=186>.



<sup>4</sup> “Emergent . . . was chosen as a metaphor, from its botanical useage. that’s why the new-ish emergent logo has a leaf on it. it’s referring to the new growth that occurs in an old forest, the hyper-green and extra-fragile stuff that grows down near the forest floor, well below the towering trees around and over it” —Mark Oestreicher. <http://www.ysmarko.com/?p=510>. Accessed 29 June, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> He helpfully hyperlinks us to the great post-modern knowledge repository Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergent>

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Jones, "Emergent.:1 Emergent Vocabulary," (Tall Skinny Kiwi, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Jones, "Emergent.:2 Countercultural History," (Tall Skinny Kiwi, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ysmarko.com/?p=529>;

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origin\\_of\\_the\\_t.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html);  
[http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origins\\_of\\_the\\_.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origins_of_the_.html).

<sup>10</sup> [http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/02/what\\_i\\_mean\\_whe.html](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/02/what_i_mean_whe.html)

<sup>11</sup> <http://web.mac.com/pagitt/iWeb/PagittBlog/Doug%20Pagitt%20Blog/Doug%20Pagitt%20Blog.html>

The Emerging Church is not so much about a movement, but rather a sensibility.<sup>12</sup> It's a mode. It's something you can be within almost any church structure or framework.<sup>13</sup>

Brian McLaren describes it as a conversation which is an idea that has also gained currency.

I generally don't even use the term movement at this point . . . I think it's more of a conversation. It's a group of people who are talking about the Gospel and church and mission, especially in terms of changes going on in our culture that some people call a shift from modern to postmodern culture.<sup>14</sup>

Conversation fits because it is collegial interaction where disparate ideas can meet in dialogue and push and stretch those engaged without the mandate for conclusions.

Scot McKnight describes it like this:

It's a conversation among 20 and 30-year-olds about the direction of the evangelical and post-evangelical church in the next generation. That will focus on local communities and embodiment or performance of the gospel by everybody involved. It's a reaction or a protest at certain levels against traditional evangelical churches.<sup>15</sup>

In comparison to the States and Britain the Emerging Church in New Zealand is quite recent. A visible expression of its beginnings was spearheaded Mark Pierson and Mike Riddell who began *Parallel Universe*, an alternative worship gathering occurring once a month in a night club venue.

Pierson was the pastor of Cityside Baptist—a church that was responding to the challenges of a post-modern cultural shift. It's shape was formed against a backdrop of Pierson's deep response to his high-school reunion where he shares:

"Again and again I met people actively involved in, or open to, spiritual searching and experiences. Not one of them was looking in the church. . . . People looking for some answers to the big questions of life, and I wouldn't invite them to my church, and I was the minister."<sup>16</sup>

It was profoundly formative for him and consequently for many people who have gone through the healing embrace of Cityside Baptist Church.<sup>17</sup> After going to Greenbelt<sup>18</sup> in 1993 Pierson came back to New Zealand and along with Mike Riddell explored integrating arts into

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<sup>12</sup> a helpful phrase from Brenda Rockell, the pastor of Cityside Baptist Church

<sup>13</sup> "Emerging Church can be used as generally as all ministries involved in contextual ministry to the younger generation or the current culture (Gen X, Gen Y, GenNext, GenText, youth culture, postmodern, alternative culture, alt. worship, fresh expressions, etc). With such a broad definition, it is therefore possible to have emergent type churches that are not emerging and Emerging Churches that are not emergent." [http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/02/what\\_i\\_mean\\_whe.html](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/02/what_i_mean_whe.html)

<sup>14</sup> David Roach, "Leaders Call 'Emerging Church Movement' a Threat to Gospel," review of Reviewed Item, *Baptist Press*, no. (2005), <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=20420>.

<sup>15</sup> Kim Lawton, "Interview: Scot Mcknight," review of Reviewed Item, *Religion & Ethics Newsletter*, no. 845 (2005), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week845/interview.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Cathy Kirkpatrick, Mark Pierson, and Michael Riddell, *The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church* (London: SPCK, 2000), 2

<sup>17</sup> there have of course been casualties here too, but generally, Cityside could be characterised as the back porch for many mainstream churches.

<sup>18</sup> [www.greenbelt.org.uk](http://www.greenbelt.org.uk)

worship.<sup>19</sup> In 1996, *Stations Of The Cross* became an annual Easter art installation based on the *Via Crucis* representing through art the 14 stages of Christ's passion according to tradition harking back to the 4th century.<sup>20</sup> It was contemporised and became over time an extraordinary phenomenon with around one thousand punters in its 9th year.

I can't say when exactly Cityside Baptist was awarded the label 'Emergent' but somewhere along the line it became a symbol of 'things emergent' throughout New Zealand and overseas. Steve Taylor, founding pastor of Graceway Baptist, spent 3 months researching it for his Doctorate for this reason.<sup>21</sup>

It seemed there was a hunger out there for this 'new type of church' to form and to exist. Because it seemed to focus away from the structures of Christianity, without necessarily letting them go, and focus on relationships and authenticity.<sup>22</sup>

To summarise the definitions that we have seen in the history of the Emerging Church, is difficult, but there are perhaps three or four characteristics that I would apply to the emerging scene. They are missional, creative, reactive and mystical. On Fowler's scale they would be stage four or five . . . questioning, exploring and ultimately conversational.<sup>23</sup>

## a journey to the edge and back again

To many of us the Emerging Church in its pre-incarnate form of the alt.worship movement promised so much to many of us. We enjoyed the playfulness of data projections (slide projectors), contemporary and historical art, mystical practices, the reintroduction of spiritual practices, dialogue, deconstruction of faith, the dialogue about this new thing and what we would do next.

We participated without constraints and were encouraged to do so in a way that allowed excellence, but it was not required.<sup>24</sup> We felt we were answering the angst of Generation X, resonating with Ethan Hawke in the movie *Before Sunrise*, and reading anything Douglas Coupland. Acid Jazz and remixes of classic funk were merging with dance beats through a maturing DJ-culture and house music spoke deeply to us.<sup>25</sup> We were a group of disenfranchised 20 somethings, trying to find a place to have faith in our world.<sup>26</sup>

I was loosely involved with *Parallel Universe* and *Stations of the Cross*. I couldn't get my head around what they were thinking in terms of mission, there didn't seem to be a strategy at all. It just seemed to be some kind of

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<sup>19</sup> Kirkpatrick, Pierson, and Riddell, *The Prodigal Project : Journey into the Emerging Church*.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.cptryon.org/prayer/xstations/bg1.html>

<sup>21</sup> Steve Taylor, *The out of Bounds Church? : Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change* (El Cajon, CA Grand Rapids, MI: Emergent YS ; Zondervan, 2005), 144.

<sup>22</sup> perhaps it was because of this shift in focus that we could feel like participants in the gospel story rather than observers and critics?

<sup>23</sup> This is an idea that Alan Jamieson presented at the Baptist Assembly Curtain Raiser at Clarks Beach, 2005 Joann Wolski Conn, "James Fowler : Stages of Faith," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*. (Paulist, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Mark Pierson, "Anti-Excellence," review of Reviewed Item, *Reality Magazine*, no. August/September (2001), <http://cityside.org.nz/node/4>.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Taylor picks up on the idea of God being a DJ in *The Out of Bounds Church*, "Postcard 8: Culture Samplers." Taylor, *The out of Bounds Church? : Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change*, 137–155.

<sup>26</sup> The Chemical Brothers released their first album *Exit Planet Dust* with a song *Leave Home*: 'The brothers' gonna work it out . . . The brothers' gonna work it out.' And we believed them.

live art installation that people participated in. I remember thinking it was cutting edge because I got to read Kurt Cobain's suicide note which had the word 'F' word in it.<sup>27</sup> And in my angst ridden, deconstructive state, when I got to say that word, I tried to hide it, but I poured as much of my disenfranchisement into that word as I could. I meant that word, I owned it. It felt naughty. And it felt good and right to say it. "This is the world out there", I said to myself. This is reality. This is authentic. And if we can't engage with that, then what on earth are we doing as Christians?

I didn't realise that this was part of a cultural shift that was affecting the edges of the mainstream church. I'm not sure any of us did, so insular was our cosmology.

All of this was a response to the culture but also a response to what we perceived to be the irrelevance of church. We were inhabiting a world that was separate to our faith world and it was a world that empowered us to individuate. Simple questions arose, "Why am I having to sing country music as worship to God when I really just dig Techno?" Works from the *Late Late Service*<sup>28</sup> provided some kind of hope that there was a way of worshipping that resonated with our sub-cultures. We didn't want to leave ourselves behind when we went through the church building doors.

It's oversimplistic to say that the Emerging Church is a reaction to the mainstream. It's more accurate to say it was an exploration of the boundaries of church expression. It's more accurate to say we weren't responding to post-modernity, we were responding to our own inner needs. We were living lifestyles in a post-modern context, and we were no more intentionally affected by postmodernity than being kiwi affected us. We felt like the rest of the church was irrelevant to these needs. We felt we had been caught up in the cultural tide that had left the church as we'd known it run aground.

Mike Riddell is more prophetic about this shift and post-911 he compares the church in the west to the collapse of the World Trade Centre towers:

Is it time to consider what sort of fitting memorial we might construct for the religion which considered itself the end of religion? Shall we pronounce the benediction and turn out the lights?<sup>29</sup>

If we are to believe the Emerging Church prophets, the church in the West is doomed.<sup>30</sup> Riddell talks about it posthumously saying that "the collapse of Christianity in the West has been no less dramatic [than the WTC attacks] in our times, and the forces which caused it no less carefully fermented by history."<sup>31</sup>

I can agree with Riddell suggesting that we need an "act of radical re-imagining of the sort provided by a Jeremiah or Deutero-Isaiah, who are forced to reconceptualise faith in a setting beyond which has previously been known", but I resist his apocalyptic urgency. I don't think we need to reject what we are and have been to find a way forward and it is for this reason that I took a role as Youth Pastor in a mainstream church. I came back, because I don't want to give up on the Bride of

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<sup>27</sup> "There's good in all of us and I think I simply love people too much, so much that it makes me feel too fucking sad."

<http://www.datejesus.com/sermons/cobain/suicide.html>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.andythornton.me.uk/Late%20Late.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Mike Riddell, "Beyond Ground Zero," (2002).

<sup>30</sup> Kirkpatrick, Pierson, and Riddell, *The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church.*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Riddell, "Beyond Ground Zero."

Christ that has carried us thus far and has more depth than many of us could ever imagine.

## themes in the Emerging Church

Marcus Borg provides a wonderfully concise articulation of the crisis that the Emerging Church is attempting to answer in his book *The Heart of Christianity*. He tells how for about twenty years, Christianity did not make sense to him. But during that difficult time he discovered a coherence within Christianity where there were no intellectual obstacles concluding that “the sacrifice that Christianity asks of us is not ultimately a sacrifice of the intellect.”<sup>32</sup>

His concern is that the incoherence that he experienced for that twenty years has affected millions of Christians. He wants to communicate to people who are struggling with what he calls the ‘earlier paradigm’ of Christianity that there is hope in the ‘emerging paradigm’. He summarises key paradigmatic differences in the following table<sup>33</sup>:

	<b>EARLIER PARADIGM</b>	<b>EMERGING PARADIGM</b>
<b>THE BIBLE’S ORIGIN</b>	A divine product with divine authority	A human response to God
<b>BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION</b>	Literal-factual	Historical and metaphorical
<b>THE BIBLE’S FUNCTION</b>	Revelation of doctrine and morals	Metaphorical and sacramental
<b>CHRISTIAN LIFE EMPHASIS</b>	An afterlife and what to believe or do to be saved	Transformation in this life through relationship with God.

**Figure 2.** Marcus Borg’s Two Paradigms

Borg’s critique strikes a chord with many characteristics of the Emerging Church and is a useful entry point for our discussion here. Nevertheless, I would like to add a fifth column that says next to each category, ‘both but with an inclination to the latter’. This is not a pluralistic cop-out but it’s a strength of the Emerging Church philosophy that it *is* so hard to define. What ignites the conversation is the set of tensions between the two paradigms. This is one of the unique attributes of the Emerging Church : it embraces differences of opinion, theological polar opposites can co-exist harmoniously. It is the result of a post-modernity’s softer view on truth, where we acknowledge that we all approach Truth subjectively. It is not a denial of Truth, just an acknowledgment of the deficiencies inherent in interpreting it. As a result we approach dogma with care.<sup>34</sup>

## postmodernity

One of the foundations for the perceived shift in culture has been the idea of post-modernism or late modernism as some are now conceding

<sup>32</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity : Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, 1st ed. ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), xi

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>34</sup> As Andrew Jones says, we can all learn from each other. He invites the reformed traditions to the table for dialogue.  
<http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/03/emergingmission.html>

it.<sup>35</sup> I will resist exploring post-modernity in detail as it's covered very well by many authors elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> Most of the Emerging Church authors see that post-modernity is a starting point for their re-imagining the way we do church even if they are hesitant to use the word post-modern to describe what they are doing.<sup>37</sup> Part of the post-modern sensibility is its sharp critique of what preceded it and as a result, post-moderns can be severely critical of the institutional church and not without good reason.

Kevin Ward observes that "church-going has been in decline in all western countries is beyond dispute. Whatever statistics one uses, they all point in one direction . . . down."<sup>38</sup> This decline has fuelled a reaction that culminated in the Emerging Church. This reaction provided the impetus for some very sharp deviation from inherited church models structures. Some great creative thinking has taken place, and the edges of the church have bubbled away with experiment and life. Often when we reject our foundations, we can access a hitherto unknown kaleidoscope of options that were around us all the time.

The bone of contention is whether this adventure is a necessary one. The mainstream applauds the experimentation, but is offended by the idea that it is needed because the current models fail. Emerging Church critics are quite correct in labelling one of her characteristics as being in 'protest' and reaction against the mainstream: I'm critical of this too. But I also acknowledge the place of the prophetic voices that agitate against institutional stagnation.

Post-modernity is one of the sticking points for the critics and it need not be. The debate is not *that* post-modernity, late-modernity happened, it's a debate over whether the Emerging Church is adequately responding to it without compromising the essence of Christianity. And like it or not, post-modernity is seen as evil and worldly by some because it has been distilled into being anti-truth and pro-pluralistic which, in using guilt by association, is how the Emerging Church is assessed. D.A. Carson has no qualms about accusing the Emerging Church as having no foundations and being doctrinally weak.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Kevin Ward, *Finding God in Godzone* (SPANZ, 2004 [cited 29 June 2006]; available from [http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/2220.0.html?&no\\_cache=1](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/2220.0.html?&no_cache=1)).

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *The out of Bounds Church? : Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change.*, 19–41. Kirkpatrick, Pierson, and Riddell, *The Prodigal Project : Journey into the Emerging Church.*, CD ROM. Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian : A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 28–38.

<sup>37</sup> " 'post-modern'—a word that has been narrowly interpreted in terms of its philosophical connection to post-structuralism, relativism and nihilism. It has been associated with an inability to form value judgements or make ethical choices. Because of this miscommunication, some leaders in the Emerging Church have chosen to avoid the word and focus on concepts and allegories that enable insight and create understanding." Andrew Jones, "Emergent:3 Postmodern Sensibility," (Tall Skinny Kiwi, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Ward, *Finding God in Godzone*.

<sup>39</sup> Because he ties Emerging Church so rigidly to postmodernity, any critique of postmodernity becomes a critique of the Emerging Church. his summation of the Emerging Church's relationship to postmodernity:

" . . . the central problem with the Emerging Church's response to postmodernism . . . emerging writers and preachers are so busy telling us how culture has changed that their response has offered very little critique of the changes. It vehemently denounces modernism, but offers nothing very penetrating when it comes to postmodernism. In particular, it has wrestled unconvincingly with the related matters of truth, certainty, historical witness and even with the nature of the Gospel itself."

D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church : Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 125.

But Carson's approach is fundamentally wrong. Truth is not at stake. Foundations are still there, in fact that is at the heart of the emergent project, "what is the gospel?" asks Rob Bell.<sup>40</sup> Emergent could be characterised as pursuing truth and foundations, but never laying claim to them, saying that they are defined by a journey of hope toward them. But the idealism behind this pursuit is what I think is missed by the critics.

So violent has the nature of the rhetoric been (and of course it takes two to tango)<sup>41</sup> that several of the Emerging Church proponents collaborated to form a carefully worded and very amicable, ten point response. Part six is what interests us here:

... we would like to clarify, contrary to statements and inferences made by some, that yes, we truly believe there is such a thing as truth and truth matters—if we did not believe this, we would have no good reason to write or speak . . .<sup>42</sup>

It's simply unfair to imply or even state that they do not accept truth. It is better to critique what the emergents claim characterise them than what could be assumed as inherited from post-modernity. So we move into what they do unashamedly claim.

## missional

An important word for the Emerging Church is *missional*. Derek Christensen defines a missional church as "... a shift in thinking from church as sender to church as being sent. There is also a change in focus from the mission originating with us and being carried forward by our initiative, to the mission being God's mission, *missio Dei*, originating with God and we become partners with Him in this task."<sup>43</sup>

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch suggest a missional church is defined by its mission as opposed to its institution and that mission is "to take the gospel to and incarnate the gospel within a specific cultural context."<sup>44</sup> In other words, place yourselves into a mission context and develop your ecclesiological identity from within that. It's about being the body of Christ 'actual' in this world, an incarnation of all that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God in the Gospels.

There is a radical re-imagining taking place here where there is a call to smaller independent communities of faith much like what is seen to be

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<sup>40</sup> Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, November, 2004 2004., 38.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Jones can get a little polemical at times too.

<sup>42</sup> Point six continues "... no, we are not moral or epistemological relativists any more than anyone or any community is who takes hermeneutical positions—we believe that radical relativism is absurd and dangerous, as is arrogant absolutism; yes, we affirm the historic Trinitarian Christian faith and the ancient creeds, and seek to learn from all of church history—and we honour the church's great teachers and leaders from East and West, North and South; yes, we believe that Jesus is the crucified and risen Saviour of the cosmos and no one comes to the Father except through Jesus; no, we do not pit reason against experience but seek to use all our God-given faculties to love and serve God and our neighbours; no, we do not endorse false dichotomies—and we regret any false dichotomies unintentionally made by or about us (even in this paragraph!); and yes, we affirm that we love, have confidence in, seek to obey, and strive accurately to teach the sacred Scriptures, because our greatest desire is to be followers and servants of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. We regret that we have either been unclear or misinterpreted in these and other areas." Doug Pagitt Tony Jones, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, Chris Seay, "A Response to Recent Criticism," (Brian McLaren).

<sup>43</sup> Derek Christensen, "Marketplace and Missional Church," *Stimulus* 13, no. 1 (2005), 13.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), xi.

described in the first three centuries of Christianity. As we explore the redefinition of church away from its structures and into its mission, we see that it is the Christian community, the new temple of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, gathered to be the light of this world.<sup>45</sup> It is not the organisation that needs to be attractive but the community defined by the *missio Dei*. Programmes need not be attractive, how we relate with God and others does. This is the example of Christ. Christ is relevant because he is personal. As Pierson says, “The incarnation itself gives us the model of relevance.”<sup>46</sup>

This challenges the often cited notion that Christians are ‘little Christs’<sup>47</sup> which is far too individualistic. The community of believers in the emerging model are actually the little Christ. It becomes a community responsibility to strive, Christ-likeness is not an individual pursuit, rather it is the community of believers, the whole body of Christ that are pursuing this. It’s a dramatic rethink on a comfortably Westernised consumer gospel where the word ‘you’ in the English translations reclaims it’s plural meanings and nuances as it is in the original language of scripture.

In a missional context, right worship is right relationships. This mandate leads us into a new understanding of what church might look like. Pete Ward coined the phrase “liquid church” and describes it as “a church that goes out to find its members whether or not they show up on a Sunday morning and participate in all the things we think of as church.”<sup>48</sup> Ward doesn’t see that there is a need for the tight ecclesiology that the institution seems to rely on. Rather, he sees that the chaos of life will oscillate people into some sense of self organisation that is still identifiable and able to constitute belonging without necessarily being present. The strength of this risky model is that it relies on good relationships rather than routine and structure in order to exist. It’s weakness is that people are people and will inevitably let the team down.

I applaud the innovation of the emerging church, but cannot see sustainable communities without some formalisation of those communities. It seems to be a natural tendency of human nature to need to organise and order the world. Even post-modernity needs a structure to support itself.

## hope for a New Zealand context

The Scriptures tell me God has always been at the edges. As Christianity in the West declines and faith is marginalized, perhaps it isn’t so dangerous to seek the Spirit on the borders. As I look at the borders and edges, I see poets, prophets, and apostles finding and showing me God. I see the spirit of God, brooding and breathing. In the ways of God, the Emerging Church might yet be the seedbed of a new communal faith. — Steve Taylor<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 54. Citing Matt 5:16.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Pierson Kirkpatrick, Pierson, and Riddell, *The Prodigal Project : Journey into the Emerging Church*.

<sup>47</sup> This is attributed to C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* and as a quick search on the net shows, <http://www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/evangelismquotes.htm> this may in fact be correct.

<sup>48</sup> Jonny Baker, "Special Interview With Pete Ward : Liquid Church," review of Reviewed Item, *Youth Specialties*, no. (2003), [http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/theology/liquid\\_church.php](http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/theology/liquid_church.php).

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, *The out of Bounds Church? : Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change.*, 38.

In New Zealand we are clearly living in a post-Christian society but not necessarily post-spiritual as Kevin Ward observes:

What we are seeing then is not so much a decline in religion as an evolution of religion so it is now much less located in institutions that consequently carry much less authority in shaping it.<sup>50</sup>

We are not very often represented well in the media—fanatics are more interesting for stories. But quite ironically the recent *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon actually gave Christianity a positive voice for a change, where Christian thinkers were given plenty of air time to discuss the implications of Dan Brown's novel.<sup>51</sup> It has also opened up many positive opportunities for the church to interface with society. But upon reflection, the zeal with which many un-churched (and surprisingly churched) people have defended Brown has caught me by surprise. People *want* this alternative story of Jesus to be true—for some reason this version of Jesus is more coherent. What does *that* say about our existential efficacy when those to whom we represent Jesus to are disillusioned with version of the story?

#### INDIGENOUS SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

The challenge for the church in New Zealand is to make Jesus (as he understood by the Gospels and the existing canon of scripture) accessible and, as Borg says, intellectually coherent to this world around us. Quite possibly reclaiming our mystic traditions and rituals (the stuff many evangelicals have rejected) may be essential in achieving this. Our society is at the very least politely tolerant and sometimes quite protective of Maori prayers and ritual. It seems that society is regaining a hunger for ritual and spiritual expression and they do not find this in the church.

But more than this even, drawing on Maori spirituality can deepen our own understanding of faith in a unique multicultural setting. Steve Taylor meshes Maori spirituality into his writing and uses the *koru* as a metaphor for the Emerging Church<sup>52</sup> whereas Paul Fromont uses the *moko* as a useful metaphor.<sup>53</sup> These connections interface with the secular because they already appeal to an accepted social spirituality. But this leads us to a deeper question.

Does rethinking our connection with the indigenous culture of New Zealand highlight our disconnection from it? And further, can we find ways of engaging with the spirituality of our ever-increasing immigrant population? One of the criticisms of the Emerging Church is that it is white-cool—that the voices and expressions out there do not reflect the cultural diversity of our multi-ethnic societies.<sup>54</sup> But the Emerging Church has great potential to cross these barriers because it has theoretically anyway, rejected colonial expressions of church.

Andrew Jones' analysis shows that it's happening in countries around the world, but it doesn't necessarily mean there will be multicultural

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<sup>50</sup> Ward, *Finding God in Godzone*.

<sup>51</sup> A simple search for "Da Vinci Code" on the TVNZ video archive will yield plenty of articles about the film.  
[http://tvnz.co.nz/view/video\\_index\\_skin/video\\_index\\_group](http://tvnz.co.nz/view/video_index_skin/video_index_group).

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, *The out of Bounds Church? : Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change.*, 47–56.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Fromont, "The "Body Art" of Emerging Church," review of Reviewed Item, *The Ooze*, no. (2003), <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=591>.

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.mosaiclife.org/blogs/andre/2006/02/11/why-im-post-emergent/>

crossover in our own context. Is this possible? Is it necessary? How much richer would we be if we not only resourced ourselves from European spirituality but also from spiritual history of other cultures, *without* condescension. A letter to Brian McLaren highlights the richness of cultural interpenetration where the writer explains how the not-so-ancient practice of Maori cannibalism provides wonderful nuances to the Eucharist.<sup>55</sup>

#### THE EMERGENT STUTTER

If increased interest in ANZAC day services is anything to go by, people are hungry for a meaningful engagement with spirituality. The outpouring of spirituality surrounding Lady Diana's death was astounding. The sharp spiritual reflections that ensued after 911 left an indelible mark on a West that thought it was invincible. The sting is (as Pierson discovered) that they aren't seeking spirituality in the church.

Does the Emerging Church provide useful points of contact here? At first glance we would like to think so, because of our high value on authenticity and spiritual journey. But the simple reality is that there has not been a massive increase (numerically at least) in church attendance since alt.worship entered our church scene. A case in point would be an event I was part of called *Sonar*.

#### AN EXPERIMENTAL EXCURSION

*Sonar* was very simply a multi-sensory space of worship. Inspired by Paul Tillich's thoughts on depth as a symbol of spiritual quality,<sup>56</sup> the object was to reduce a Christian worship gathering to its simplest elements. Once a month there was one hour of meditative contemplation assisted by live soundscapes and video loops and optional stations in the centre of the room for communion and one or two others. The meditative space invariably became what Borg calls a 'thin space' and we were led in a set of compline prayers drawn from the Anglican prayer book. The first two of the twelve or so that we facilitated were well attended with around 30 punters (some of whom were disconnected from church and found this service very beneficial). Toward the end of its time, we were down to an average of 5-7 people.

There were many stimulating conversations that took place around *Sonar* and it invigorated probably five different worshipping communities outside of Cityside.<sup>57</sup> But soon the burden of doing this once a month took over and we tried to spread the load. I'm not sure if that's what triggered the beginning of the end or not, but soon *Sonar* faded.

A constant feedback was that people wanted this, but they didn't attend. This is still a success story, not the least because it was experimental,<sup>58</sup> but because it became a boundary marker for some of us.

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[http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/2006/01/questions\\_from\\_august\\_2005\\_part\\_ii\\_319.html](http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/2006/01/questions_from_august_2005_part_ii_319.html)

<sup>56</sup> Paul Tillich, "The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich: Chapter 7: The Depth of Existence," review of Reviewed Item, no., <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=72>.

<sup>57</sup> There was consistent representation from Cityside Baptist, The Edge, YFC Waikato, Graceway Baptist and Mt Albert Baptist. Even Northcote Baptist had a look in at one point.

<sup>58</sup> In an e-mail exchange with Alan Hirsch he made comment that "without risk and experiment we are stuck with a declining model and no-one will dare to undertake mission

I think it defined an edge and created safety for those who committed to it internally but did not commit materially.

It faded not because of lack of attendance but because of lack of resources in the people who facilitated it. We were unable to sustain it ourselves anymore. Experimentation is good, but it does come at a cost. Success was measured by comment, not bums on seats. There was a completely un-churched drummer who played with us one night who passionately commented that “*that* was a spiritual experience.” The church had provided a spiritual space. It was unashamedly Christian and he connected with our God.

But a pastoral question remains unanswered. When something like *Sonar* finishes, what happens to him and the many others for whom this is their only tangible spiritual connection? This is a tremendous weakness with the emerging conversation and is why I want to suggest that it ought to identify itself as a prophetic movement to the mainstream rather than an alternative version to church.

## conclusion

In 2004, Pierson had this to say:

I am more convinced than ever that the future of the Church in the West doesn't lie in the pure alternative worship or Emerging Church models. Or at least not solely or predominantly in these models. In 50 years time these movements, if remembered at all, will be seen as eddies in the flow of church life rather than a new stream. As a generalisation, there is often too much emphasis on aesthetics and too little on spirituality and an encounter with God. We offer froth and bubble rather than depth. The ancient traditions of the Church are too often neglected altogether or reframed with too little understanding of the essence of what is being adapted. The Future didn't come down in the last shower. Most groups seem unable to do worship in natural light or without heavy reliance on technology. And in particular, I think we've got our leadership model wrong.<sup>59</sup>

Pierson was right. We didn't want to hear it, but it rang true. 10-15 years into this project, we are not visibly attending to the needs of the 'post-moderns'. Church attendance and connection has not grown because of us appealing to Gen X. They still don't factor in the statistics which isn't to say that we fail, it's just that our impact is less easy to measure.

I think the hope for the future lies not just in the creative and inspired cells that spring up under the emerging growth, but in the way that this growth nourishes and invigorates the rest of the church. With Pierson I see that emerging sensibilities need to be sympathetic to and resourced by the mainstream church which is already indebted to these bubbling edges. The Emerging Church is a prophetic arm of the Body of Christ. Its function is to be radically challenging, to keep us on our toes, to raise the questions and provide boundary markers for our own exploration. Often they will do this in reaction to what they perceive as the modernist movement, but the Church can be more gracious than chiding them for that. There's tremendous creativity in that angst, and

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for fear of failure, and subsequent rejection, by their peers.” 27 June, 2006. And *Sonar* falls into this risk taking venture. Nothing is wasted.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Pierson, "Uk Trip," review of Reviewed Item, no. (2004), <http://cityside.org.nz/articles/UK%20Report.doc>.

misdirected as it may be at times, the Church is reaping the benefits of those questions now.

If the Emerging Church were to more proactively connect with the mainstream where there is a huge resource in terms of people, facilities and finance, then it would allow the fringe, the blurry boundaries that it inhabits to widen and not only embrace more of those whom the Emerging Church can be quick to condemn, but perhaps redeem the wider church's tarnished cultural image.

The Emerging Church is part of the mainstream expression, at least in form. But in terms of ethos, trying to get the Church to become missional is quite a task. In this sense, McLaren's observation<sup>60</sup> that only those who have not been affected by Saddleback and Willow Creek models are the ones who will embrace the emerging paradigm is probably quite right, but there's no harm in trying.

I am committed to the mainstream though and wearying as it is at times, things are changing. As I said in 2002 when I began at Mt Albert Baptist Church, "I've not given up on the old girl yet."

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<sup>60</sup> "Churches that 'missed' the traditional-to-contemporary transition (à la Willow Creek or Saddleback) might have a better chance of transitioning to post-modern ministry than ones that became contemporary . . . contemporary churches are happily modern, and their numbers (attendance and budget) are probably sufficient so that the pain of changing would be greater than the pain of not changing." McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey.*, 147.

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