

VOL. 1 • NO. 2 • WINTER 2010  
**THE CONVERSATIONS OF OUR TIMES**

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161

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### **Abstract**

The changes in what the church is and what the church does is explored in this article. These changes are the result of the challenges that have descended on culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the midst of these challenges several conversations are taking place that Christian leaders can't afford to ignore because each one challenges the fabric of Western Christianity as we know it today. With the goal of reporting what is at stake six budding movements are explored: Emergent, Incarnational, Organic, Reproductive, Missional and Sim Card. Each is summarized with a short explanation as to their potential impact on the church at large. This article does not position itself to be the definitive report on the results each is experiencing, but intends to spur leadership toward productive conversation.

### **the morphing protestant scene**

We all know our world has radically changed over the past few decades. I first wrote about this change in 1993 in my book *Dancing with Dinosaurs*<sup>1</sup> where I

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<sup>1</sup> William M. Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, Abingdon Press.

described the change as a “crack in history” into which everything was disappearing, never to be seen again. Since then our world has morphed from a rather bland, simple, play-by-the-rules world, to a wild and wooly no-holds-barred world. Nowhere is this wild ride any more evident than on 9/11 and the current financial world crises.

In the midst of this wild, unruly ride, several conversations are taking place that Christian leaders can't afford to ignore because each one challenges the fabric of Western Christianity as we know it today. So we had better pay attention. My goal in sharing these conversations with you is not to criticize but to report what's at stake.

### **the primary players in these conversations**

162

The primary players in these conversations are multiplying like rabbits, and some of them have the possibility of becoming full-fledged movements. Each of these groups has a different spin on what type of church is needed to address the unfolding twenty-first century culture and has the potential to play an important part in the shaping of the twenty-first century church.

### **the emergent movement**

Emergents are a growing group of disenfranchised pastors who are beginning non-traditional churches in protest to what they have found in traditional churches. They are hard to pin down because they practice a “both/and” approach to most issues. They prefer shades of gray instead of absolutes.

The best way to describe this movement is to start with their basic message. Emergents believe that it is no longer possible to hold on to the tenets and practices of modern-day Christianity for two reasons: one, they are flawed, and they don't relate to today's world; and two, the postmodern world requires a new view of faith and new kind of Christian—a postmodern faith and a postmodern Christian.

Emergents believe the more conversations they have, the closer they come to truth. To them truth is more beauty than absolute fact. Truth is messy and beautiful but never objective or eternally certain. Emergents speak with passion and urgency but never with certainty.

The primary leader of Emergents is Brian McLaren, although Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt are also strong voices for the movement.

Brian's writings today are quite different from what he was saying when I first met him for coffee over a decade ago. Later we crossed paths at the church where he was pastoring before pursuing his Emergent agenda. The worship and ministry

of his church was much like what I would see all over the country in a thriving, non-denominational church. Today, his writings ask the questions many of us have been afraid to ask, and in doing so, he pushes orthodox Christianity to its limits. I doubt if what he writes today would be acceptable in the church where he was formerly the pastor.

I first met Doug Pagitt when he was working with Leadership Network. I remember sitting next to him in a workshop on equipping leaders for ministry. Midway through the workshop (which I thought was excellent), Doug leaned over to me, made a critical comment, and he left the room, not to return. Not long after that, he left Leadership Network and birthed Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, a church squarely in the Emergent camp.

During the month of September, I had a month-long, fruitful, online conversation with Tony Jones, who was at the time the Executive Director of Emergent Village, and author of *The New Christians*. I recommend his book, especially Appendix B entitled, "A Response to our Critics." During our conversation, Jones made it clear that Emergents believe that no one comes to God except through Jesus. For the most part, my conversation with Tony settled some, but not all, of my concerns about the movement.

163

However, the Emergent movement has provided a marvelous conversation for all of us, because it has revealed the ugly truth—the established Christian church in the West is basically apostate and dead. And they offer a way forward for many disenfranchised church members. For that, we should be grateful and enjoy the conversation.

However, some recent events have occurred that don't bode well for the Emergents: the defection of key players such as Dan Kimball and Scot McKnight, the recent release of Tony Jones from the position of Executive Director, and the dropping of the name "Emergent" by many of the leaders because of its negative baggage.

Nevertheless, Emergents will play a part in shaping the twenty-first century church but a much smaller part than most people think (see Phyllis Tickle's book, *The Great Emergence*<sup>2</sup>). This is due to the following: their approach to truth appeals mostly to the intelligentsia; they are too unorganized to grow sustainable, reproducing congregations (most Emergent churches are relatively small congregations); and a modern movement as decentralized as their leadership is becoming, will find it hard to sustain itself (no movement has succeeded without a central figure leading the movement).

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<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, Baker Books, 2008.

For my review of *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian McLaren, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=1609>.

For two more negative views of Emergents see the following:

D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Zondervan, 2005.

R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*, Crossway, 2005.

### **the incarnational movement**

Like Emergents, the Incarnational folks have a love/hate relationship with institutional Christianity. However, their dislike of the institutional church is based on a much more orthodox interpretation of Scripture.

164 Incarnational folks want the church to go to where the people are instead of trying to attract them to the institution. Incarnationals (most of which are fledglings groups) send people out into the culture to spread the seeds of Christianity in coffee shops, cafes, the workforce, etc. Having a worship service and programs to attract people to the institution aren't central to their concern. Relationships and friendships among the neighborhoods where people live are their primary concern. The Incarnational model is seeking to bring the church back to its historical roots and free it from its institutionally-dominated understanding of what it means to be a church. However, taken to its ultimate conclusion, the institutional church at best isn't central to their movement, and at worst is not needed.

The primary speaker for the Incarnational group is Alan Hirsch. Hirsch's first book, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*, should be read by every Christian who knows something is wrong with today's version of Christianity but can't put their finger on what it is. Throughout the book I found myself saying "Yes, but!" On one level I envy the journey they invite us to join. On another level I wonder what will become of the institutional church if what they propose is followed. They go far beyond "reshaping" or talking about innovation as is suggested on the cover of the book.

A better title for the book might be *The Rewiring of Things to Come: The Beginning of a Revolution*. Since Alan and I are friends, in an email I asked him about this alternate title. Here is his reply: "You have exposed us for the revolutionaries that we are—our cover is blown. But I have to say that I feel very flattered by your review. Thanks for the deep affirmation I find in it . . . and thanks for its warnings as well." Hirsch is one of the most authentic, passionate, and deep thinkers on the church scene today and needs to be heard.

Hirsch is advocating a wholesale rewiring of Christianity back its twenty-first century roots. He actually shows us how to be the church without being institutional at all. He talks about a missional, incarnational, messianic, apostolic church that is found within the surrounding community rather than apart from and behind four walls. Hirsch challenges every facet of Christianity today from ordination to the traditional creeds and offers a new, but ancient, way forward.

Hirsch is quick to point out how the church in China under Mao flourished without the institution. The problem with comparing the church in the U.S. and China is that public institutions were not part of the fabric of the Chinese society under Mao. Give China another fifty years and watch the emergence of the institutional church.

In 2007, Alan was in a group of twenty-five world-class Christian leaders I gathered together at my home for two days. The topic of that gathering was the Apostolic Movement in the twenty-first century. During our time together, I interviewed Alan about his first book, *The Forgotten Ways*. I point blank asked him if I had read him correctly, that is, if you take what he says in the book to its logical conclusion, we should do away with all institutional churches. Although he didn't say "Yes," he did say the following: "You need to realize the present Protestant movement as it is today has the capacity to reach only thirty-five percent of the U.S. population. What are you going to do with the other sixty-five percent?" A valid point.

Since being in the U.S. for several years now, Alan is more open to the existence of the institutional church, but he still has a deep skepticism regarding its future, as should any caring and thinking person.

Although I agree with Alan that most churches have forgotten what it means to be the church, I feel it's impossible for Christianity to survive without the institution in a society where institutions are part of the basic fabric of life. Like the Emergents, Incarnationals will be part of the twenty-first century church. It will be a smaller part than the Emergents, however, mostly because they seem to have less use for the institutional church.

For my review of Hirsch's two books, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2245>.

### **the organic movement**

The Organic Movement is a kissing cousin to the Incarnational movement and a distant cousin to the Emergent movement. Compared to the other two movements, it sees little to no need for the institutional church. But unlike the Emergent

movement, and more like the Incarnationals, the Organics are more literal in their interpretation of Scripture and truth.

Although there are several voices for the Organic movement, the most prominent voice is Frank Viola and his two books (with Barna) *Pagan Christianity* and *Reimagining Church*. His third book in the series, *Finding Organic Church*, isn't on the same plane as his first two books. The first two books are meticulous, interesting, and disturbing looks at the New Testament understanding of the early church compared to Western Christianity.

Although Viola has reacted against all forms of the institutional church, he stands in direct opposition to the Emergent folks because he takes a literal approach to the Scripture. His book documents the problems with the institutional church that functions more like a business than the living organism it was created to be. His major criticism of today's church, other than it being totally non-biblical, is its passivity and elitism. I should stress here that any positive movement away from these two sins of the church and this book has done its job.

166

Viola feels that most of the practices of modern day Christianity are totally foreign to Scripture and are lethal to the development of the kingdom of God. Every church leader ought to read this book and respond to its criticism of modern day Christianity.

Several years ago Frank sent me a copy of what became the book *Pagan Christianity*. He wanted to know if I would be interested in coauthoring it with him. I turned it down even though I agreed with ninety-nine percent of it. It was that one percent that caused me to turn it down. If you take Frank's treatment of Scripture to its logical conclusion, you must do away with the institutional church. I'm not willing to do that. Whereas I agree the present form of Christianity isn't biblical and needs to be trashed, I question whether what they suggest can survive much less thrive within our institutional context. So I'm not ready to give up on the institutional church even though I've been a constructive critic of it for more than three decades.

For my extensive review of Viola's book *Reimagining the Church*, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2918> and *Pagan Christianity* <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2628>.

### **summary of the first three movements**

All three of the above movements are clearly reactions against the traditional Attractional church that waits for the public to come to it instead of going out to it. Some eighty to eighty-five percent of Attractional churches are either on a plateau or are dying because their primary function is on the care and feeding of

the members and the institution. They are more like hospices or hospitals than churches. So it might be in the best interest of most churches in the West to listen to these voices since they clearly show up the fallacies of the institutionally focused church.

However, over the past decade too much time and energy has been taken up by these conversations. I have no problem with the Incarnational, Organic, and Emergent movements being part of the ongoing conversation as long as we realize they are just one of the many voices in the midst of much larger and important conversations.

We should all be indebted to these folks for bringing to our attention so elegantly the fact that Western Christianity is nowhere near what Jesus had in mind when He sent His disciples out into the world to build His church. We should be willing to concede that most churches in the West are spiritually dead and are beyond revitalization or turn around. Their only hope is resurrection. That is why I wrote *A Second Resurrection*<sup>3</sup>. They are in need of resurrection. However, these movements are not the primary conversation in which we should be engaged.

167

So, let's turn to two other major players in this ongoing conversation that have the potential to eclipse all three of these movements, as important as they are.

### **the reproductive movement**

The Reproductive movement focuses primarily on advancing the kingdom of God by multiplying itself and its people in any way possible. Their primary focus is on transforming the world by reproducing disciples rather than by building large institutional churches (even though their efforts are more likely to result in large churches). Most of these churches are heavy into planting churches that plant other churches and multiple-site forms of ministry because they believe this is still the best way to make disciples. Mission shapes everything they do and believe, including the purpose and meaning of "ecclesia." Reproductives believe Christians are called and blessed only to be "sent" into the world to be a blessing to it. Mission is the totality of what the church is.

The most prominent leaders of this movement include folks like Bob Roberts, Dave Ferguson, and all the people involved in movements like Exponential.<sup>4</sup>

The Reproductives realize reaching the world will take the combined effort of all forms of Christianity. Therefore the movement embodies the best of the Incarnational, the Organic, and the Emergent values without throwing the baby (institutional church) out with the bath water. They believe we must plant as many

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<sup>3</sup> [http://21stcenturystrategiesinc.com/cart/index.php?main\\_page=product\\_info&cPath=11\\_1&products\\_id=244](http://21stcenturystrategiesinc.com/cart/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=11_1&products_id=244)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.exponentialconference.org/>

churches as possible in as short a period of time as possible. Rather than the institutional church, their emphasis is on planting churches that will plant other churches in order to transform the world. Their emphasis is on the process of the reproduction of Christians and the transformation of societies rather than building churches. These leaders also realize that in today's world, big may not always best, so they embrace the multi site route as well.

There is one thing the Reproductives need to do. They need to get together and bring about one huge movement that will change the course of the world. So I have to ask: "What's keeping you from forming a Reproduction Bank where people of all persuasions can donate to the cause of planting churches?"

For my review of Robert's book *The Multiplying Church*, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2704>

For my review of Ferguson's book *The Big Idea*, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2317>

To learn about Exponential go to <http://www.exponentialconference.org>

168

### **the missional movement**

The Missional Movement is led by folks like Guder, Roxburgh, and McNeal, with the foundation laid by Lesslie Newbigin. Reggie McNeal's recent book, *Missional Renaissance*, is becoming a classic on the movement. I sent Reggie an email asking him about how he sees his relationship with the various movements underway today. Here's his response:

"... for me the issue is about expanding the bandwidth of the expression of church; my inclinations are to strategize more and more about "the" church and not building "a" church. And I'm finding an openness of church leaders across the board to consider what it means to be "the" church in a community. As you know almost all my clients "have Sunday coming" so I'm trying to help them figure out how to paddle out and catch the missional wave, helping them figure out that this is more than a methodological tweak, but fundamentally a new way of seeing church. The scorecard for missional expression is much broader than the old metrics of how many, how often, and how much—all tied to church activity. How many hungry kids are there in our city? How many better marriages do we have? Those seem to be just as legitimate a metric as how many kids we ran in VBS."

One of the most impressive books on the Missional church is *Introducing the Missional Church* by Roxburgh and Boren. They don't throw the baby (local church) out with the bath water (Missional). I'm a simple person, so I boil books' arguments down to the lowest denominator. When I do that with this book, here's



what I come up with. The Missional church is the one that asks a basic question: “What is God up to in our neighborhood?” rather than, “How can we improve what we’re doing so we can attract more people to worship?” I can totally live with that definition. I have long shared this prayer with people who come to my seminars: “God, show us what you are up to and run over us with it until we become a part of it.”

What impresses me about the Missional movement is it contains the best of all of the movements listed above. All of the conversations need to focus on what it means to be missional. So I’m placing the Missional movement in a group of its own because any legitimate church has to be missional, or it isn’t a church. The Missional movement echoes in all forms of the legitimate church of the twenty-first century and is having a huge impact on shaping the twenty-first century church. So in a sense all of the above groups share a common theme—the institutional church has to focus on transforming the community rather than on building a church. It just seems to me in our context those forms that don’t badmouth the institutional form of church but stress the missional foundation are the most potent movements for the twenty-first century.

169

To see my review of *Missional Renaissance*, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2845>.

To see my review of Roxburg’s *Missional Leader*, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=2653>.

To see my review of Guder’s *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, go to <http://churchconsultations.com/index.php?id=1612>.

### **the sim card movement**

The Sim Card movement is the only wildcard in this deck, and I couldn’t resist briefly referring to it. Although it’s a recent player on the scene compared to the other groups, the Sim Card movement has the potential to multiply faster than the other groups, and it just might be a bigger player in shaping the future church than anyone dreams.

A Sim Card church is a virtual online church where people do everything people do in a traditional church—form community, worship, get baptized, take communion, get married, etc. Sound silly? Well, get used to it, because it is already happening.

The reason Westerners have difficulty understanding the virtual church is because they think of the church as a *place* rather than a *gathering* of Christians for the purpose of carrying out the kingdom of God. If the church isn’t a place but a gathering, there is no reason the virtual church can’t be thought of as a real

church. If the Sim Card church does nothing more than cause us to question the fallacy of thinking of the church as a place, it will have served its purpose no matter how well it develops into a movement.

If people can meet, date, and get married based on an internet profile in sites such as EHarmony, surely Christians can meet, worship, and develop community online. So, instead of sitting around asking ourselves if the virtual church is real, we should be asking how we use it to transform the world.

Although the verdict is still out on the Sim Card church, it's worth watching. After all, the whole world is going virtual, and why shouldn't the church?

### **the only valid conversation**

170 So, the only valid conversation that will shape the twenty-first century church is the one that focuses on being the church in the world, transforming it, and bringing in the kingdom of God. That means that any form of conversation that focuses on the mere survival or health of the institution isn't a welcome partner in this ongoing conversation. It also means that any conversation that denies the validity of the institutional church simply doesn't understand the context of Western culture and will have little effect on the twenty-first century church.

At this point in time, Western culture is based on three foundations—we are institutionally based, economically driven, and concert enthralled. We are not an agrarian culture, we don't barter for goods, and we don't do things on a small scale. If Western Christianity is going to bring the Gospel to bear on this culture, it will have to do so within the context of these three foundational realities.

So, let the conversations continue.

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