

## THE EMERGING CHURCH BY EDDIE GIBBS

FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, THE CHURCH IS ALWAYS EMERGING BECAUSE IT IS AN ANTICIPATORY SIGN OF GOD'S KINGDOM. It is the "becoming Church" because the classic "marks" of its authenticity, namely one, holy catholic and apostolic are more statements of faith than of actuality. It must forever strive to become what Christ intended for his body, which will only emerge in all its fullness when the Church on earth is translated to the Church in heaven.

This has been a welcome trend in recent years, especially through the influence of the late Lesslie Newbigin, who alerted the churches of Europe to the fact that they faced a missionary challenge every bit as demanding as the challenges facing the churches of the Majority World. His insights have been taken up by a group of theologians and missiologists in North America through the *Church and Our Culture Network*, who have published a series of books discussing the "missional Church". These developments provide a healthy corrective to the previous mindset that separated ecclesiology from missiology, to the impoverishment of both disciplines. The separation of the two contributed to a widespread "missionless Church" on the one hand, and a "churchless mission" on the other. This was more the case among Protestant thinkers than among Roman Catholics in the wake of Vatican II.

For some time we have been painfully aware of the chronic decline in Church attendance throughout Europe, to the point that a number of traditional denominations are faced with the wholesale closure of churches, as well as the threatened collapse of their structures. Here in the USA, the situation for the so-called mainline denominations is not so bleak, despite the fact that many of those denominations have shrunk to the point where they are now more sideline than mainline churches. The regional variations in church attendance are far more marked than in Europe, ranging from an estimated five to eight per cent in the Northwestern states of Oregon and Washington, to over forty per cent in the Southern states. Yet, the average size of churches continues to shrink so that, proportionally, many more are no longer financially viable. Also, on both sides of the Atlantic the "under thirty-five generation" (Generation X) is turning away from the Church at an alarming rate.

The emerging Church must be seen in this context. Whereas overall Church attendance continues its downward trend, there are significant movements that promise hope for the future. Christ has promised to build his Church until the end of time. During the past eighteen months, I have been working with Ryan Bolger, a PhD student, to try and identify and understand these new movements.<sup>1</sup> It must be stressed that the emergence of these movements has not at this point made a sufficiently large impact to arrest the decline in Church attendance. Many of the new movements are too recent and nebulous to know whether they are of brief duration or long-term significance.

The emerging Church movement includes both mission-focused groups within traditional denominations, as well as independent and radically different expressions of the Church. Among the former, the leaders we have met are not disgruntled church members. To the contrary, they are loyal to their heritage and are seeking to be accountable to their church and denominational leaders.

The mission focus of most groups is on reaching Generation X, and those in their teens and early twenties (Generation Y). An older generation might wonder why it is necessary to start new satellite congregations or separate churches for this age range. The reason is not simply a matter of worship style, but rather the strong emphasis among Generation X on community and on leadership that is highly relational. They protest against Church governance that is characterised by a culture of control, which was the dominant management style of older leaders who have shaped the organisational structure of much of the Church.

The problem is that the structures of traditional denominations were largely shaped by the culture of modernity. Centralised, bureaucratic and top-down structures no longer work in today's culture. Leadership training courses designed for the business world (more often remedial retraining!) emphasise that leadership emerges at every level of an organisation and not just at the top. In the information age in which hierarchies are being displaced by networks, the most significant initiatives are from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Many of the emerging leaders are not coming through the structures but are entrepreneurs taking extraordinary initiatives.

Such leaders have a clear vision; they are risk takers who are prepared to learn as they go. They know where they want to get but are willing to openly admit that they don't know how to get there! They operate out of a faith conviction, living one day at a time, which makes them refreshingly flexible and winsomely humble. Their style of leadership is strongly relational – they are driven by the desire to empower and are ambitious for the people around them.

We began by emphasising that the emerging churches are structured to fulfil their missional call. From the 1970s to the present time many church leaders have looked to the “seeker sensitive” approach to evangelisation. This approach emphasises the need to provide attractive worship services so that the unchurched seeker feels comfortable and has an opportunity to hear the good news concerning Christ in a clear and contemporary style and setting. This movement has been promoted by impressive megachurches usually located in affluent and growing suburbs inhabited by those with previous church links. In the USA, it has particularly effective in reaching the returning Boomers who became spiritual seekers after the counter-culture movement of the 1960s, the horrors of the Vietnam War and the disillusionment and distrust of institutions in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal. Where the Church is simply dismissed as irrelevant, as in the UK, the “seeker-sensitive” approach to evangelisation has proved to be inadequate in most situations – especially for older urban locations with their ancient facilities, acute social problems and a multi-ethnic population.

It is not surprising that the emerging Church movements are largely, although not exclusively, located in urban areas. The under thirty-fives are not attracted to the megachurches; they are looking for relationships. They dislike professionalism that creates a passive audience but are attracted to, and want to be involved in, a highly creative environment. They want to hear the stories of their peers and have the opportunity to tell their own story – only then will God's story begin to make sense as they see how their own story relates to the bigger picture. They feel the need to create space in order to escape the culture of control that characterises so much of the Church, but they also recognise the need for accountability.<sup>2</sup>

I value the insight of a leader of a largely Generation X church who is in his mid forties. He commented that in order to have a healthy GenX congregation you need three generations. Whereas the twenty-somethings did not, for the most part, get

on too well with their parents, they love their grandparents! He believed that the senior members of his church have a vital role in mentoring the younger people. I have seen this in operation on both countries. But older people need to be prepared to listen and learn from those who represent a very different culture from their own. Too many older church members have succeeded in driving their children and grandchildren away from the church due to their inflexibility and judgmental attitudes. By learning to mentor they can contribute to the healing of relationships between the generations.

A heartening development among Generation X is the extent to which they celebrate ethnic diversity. Their attitudes are in marked contrast to many among the older generation who remain suspicious of people who are different – there is a clear line between those they consider “insiders” and those who are “outsiders”. My own generation, and even more so that of my parents, have an insular mentality, which was reinforced by the fact that we are an island people who were not very mobile until after World War II, when car ownership became more widespread. By contrast, globalisation and a networked urban culture shape the younger generation. Their education is multicultural and their friendships run across racial boundaries. This openness is expressed in the racial mix of younger congregations and in their leadership. Homogeneity is expressed not in racial terms, but in terms of a common popular cultural mix that binds them together.

As Ryan Bolger and I have reflected on the research we have so far undertaken, a significant difference is beginning to emerge between the UK and the USA in terms of the unchurched youth cultures. In the UK, those working among young people are going with the young people into their culture rather than extracting them and processing them for the Church sub-culture. In the USA, the trend is in the opposite direction, i.e. extracting people from “the world” in order to bring them into the Church. This difference is partly explained by the greater likelihood of young people being “never churchied” in the UK context, as distinct from the “formerly churchied,” which is more the case here in the USA. A second factor is that the emerging churches in the UK are more likely to be located in an urban (inner-city) setting rather than in suburbia or in the more fashionable city-centre locations.

In most pioneer mission engagement, those who embark in such initiatives have to be prepared to be involved for the long haul. Short-term “raiding parties” are ineffective and counter-productive. In theological terms, the approach is incarnational in emphasis, which means a long-term commitment, the building of deep friendships, the sharing of pain and discerning the signs of God’s presence within the cultural context. There can be no divine empowerment without a dying to self. The Church must be truly indigenous, which means that it arises out of the grass-roots culture, without being confined within it. As we have already mentioned, youth cultures are global and eclectic. Before long this is expressed in worship, drawing from various genres and periods. Whereas the Boomer “seeker-sensitive” churches have trashed tradition, Generation X and Y churches mine the rich heritage of Christianity: combining contemporary art forms with ancient liturgies, poetry, chants and icons they produce a highly creative mix.

Despite the downward trend of churchgoing, I remain optimistic as I see some of the new things God is doing at the present time. As a person in my mid-60s I do not always feel comfortable. “The music’s too loud and I cannot hear the words” is a frequent refrain uttered by my generation. But we are talking about cross-cultural ministry, and if it is being done authentically it should look and sound different. If it’s all too familiar to people of my generation and older then there must be something wrong! The same can be said increasingly in regard to the Boomer generation!

In this article I have deliberately refrained from giving specific examples of the movement I have described because the field research is still in process. It would be premature to attempt to classify its various tributaries. But I trust that these general observations will serve as a stimulus to look around our localities to see if today's "fringe groups", who we might too readily dismiss, become the frontiers of tomorrow.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Due to the severe financial and time restrictions under which we have been working, we have had to restrict our research to England and largely to the West Coast of the United States. We are looking for comparisons and contrasts between countries that have very different Church and society relationships, and cultural influences. The working title of our book is *The Emerging Church: Frontiers or Fringes?*

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the emphasis on youth churches represents an intermediate strategy, providing an opportunity to develop a different church culture that is free from the hierarchical control of modernity.