

## The Emergent Church movement<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Something about the word “missional” has captured the imagination of many Christians in Western societies and beyond. The term, though relatively new as a description of the church, is now used widely across confessional traditions and within both “Emergent” and “Missional” Church movements. The employment of the term “missional” includes the superficial along with the profound, the culturally captive alongside the richly biblical. At its best, the word “missional” describes not a specific *activity* of the church, but the very *identity and vocation* of the church as it takes up its role in God’s story in the context of its culture, and participates in his mission. This article will engage the Emergent Church movement and summarize its contributions toward the development of the missional identity and vocation of the church in the West. In the next article, the Missional Church movement will be engaged and its contributions toward the development of a missional identity and vocation for the church in the West will be summarized.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The church in the West faces an identity crisis in light of the collapse of Christendom and the dislocation of the church’s dominant position in society. This problem has been well documented in recent years by the work of Lesslie Newbigin and those who have built on his important work. An ever-growing number of voices are calling for the church in the West to recover its missional identity and role – to become once again missional in its ecclesiology. As work is being done on developing a missional ecclesiology, attention needs to be given to the critical task of discernment. How can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover a missional identity?

Discernment of missional vocation for the church in the West must take place in the context of dialogue and engagement with those from other theological and ecclesiological traditions. There are two important movements attempting to recover the missional identity and role of the church in the West. Those two movements are loosely defined as the “Missional Church” movement and the “Emergent Church” movement. These movements encompass a wide diversity of theological and ecclesiological traditions and backgrounds but are held together by a common desire to discern missional vocation as the church in the West seeks to renew its missional identity. The Emergent church movement is a growing, global, inter-denominational movement that is finding expression in many diverse ecclesiastical and theological traditions. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger define emerging churches as “missional communities that are arising (emerging) from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus seeking to be faithful in their place and time” (2005, 28).

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on Chapter 4.2 of Sheridan’s doctoral dissertation (2012). H Jurgens Hendriks and Mike Goheen were the promoters.

## 2. BRIEF HISTORY

Initially, there was movement, particularly in North America, around an emerging generational ministry focus among youth pastors and young church planters to the so-called “Generation X.” Networks began to emerge around this generational issue. Within the United Kingdom context, alternative worship movements began. These movements led to the emergence of a “church within a church” – expressions of the alternative worship movements among both youth groups and post-youth-group communities.

As both of these movements began to evolve, they morphed into something deeper. Youth leaders and planters began attending to the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity and began to realize that this shift encompassed something that was much wider and deeper than the generational reality. The search was on for new forms of church and “church practices” that would somehow go deeper than finding strategies for growth or renewal; and, at the same time, would be relevant with and connect to the emerging postmodern culture in the West (Jones 2008, 7-20).

Tony Jones’ insight into the desire to move beyond the perceived dichotomies of liberalism and fundamentalism resonates with Scot McKnight’s keen insight into what he describes as the “ironic faith” that influenced this movement as it began. McKnight identifies eight catalysts to the Emergent movement:<sup>2</sup>

- For Emergents, the evangelical doctrine of inerrancy does not sufficiently express the truth about the Bible.
- The gospel Emergent leaders heard as children and teens is a caricature of Paul’s teaching. They are discovering Jesus, the gospels, and “kingdom of God” theology.
- The Bible and science debates affect Emergent leaders, leading them to embrace the Bible as largely narrative in form and to not see it in an antagonistic relationship to modern science.
- Many of these leaders have been badly burned by the lack of integrity among popular evangelical leaders of their era. This has pushed them to champion the importance of integrity and authenticity and also become leery and at times downright suspicious of established church leaders and their potential to abuse power and authority.
- Emergent leaders are deeply affected by the multiculturalism and pluralism of the public school systems in North America and Europe. These realities and ideologies have made them more pluralistic in their view of world religions and broad in their understanding of what it means to be “Christian.”
- Through appreciation of postmodern thinkers, Emergent leaders are learning to exercise a deconstructionist critique of the Bible and sometimes of God. This is particularly the case with “difficult” passages of the Bible.
- The homosexuality issue, particular the heated cultural debate that has ensued in North America, has deeply affected them. There is a shared belief among Emergents that the Bible’s teaching on this issue is much more sophisticated and nuanced than the pro-gay and anti-gay tendencies they see in culture and the church.
- Finally, Emergent leaders are also greatly shaped by the postmodern critiques of language. As a result, many are keenly sensitive to the limitations of language to capture theological truths.

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<sup>2</sup> McKnight describes these as catalysts that “moved disaffected evangelicals from an ironic faith within evangelicalism to a fork in the road: either abandon traditional evangelicalism for an emergent form of post-evangelical Christianity, or abandon Christianity altogether” (McKnight 2008b).

This historical context has led some critics, like D.A. Carson, to describe the Emergent movement as a “protest movement.” Carson sees in the movement a four-fold protest along the following lines: a protest against the institutional established church in the West; a protest against conservative forms of evangelicalism, particularly Fundamentalism and Dispensationalism; a protest against modernism, especially modernist epistemologies; and a protest against seeker-sensitive, mega-church movements within evangelicalism (2005, 20-36).

Against the backdrop of this brief historical context, it is easier to appreciate what many leaders within the movement have described as the “liminal phase” in which the movement finds itself. This time of “liminality” is one of “dismantling and rebuilding.” So it is wise to look back to what this movement is emerging *from* more than what it is emerging *into*.

McKnight’s catalysts above are helpful in identifying the nuanced realities from which the movement is seeking to emerge. A key piece here is the cultural shifts that those in this movement feel we in the West are experiencing, from modernity to postmodernity. Because of the uncertainty of our time period, those in this movement are calling for space to have a conversation about what it would look like to dismantle the church in the West and rebuild it. The Emergent “conversation” is about what we need to dismantle and what, as well as how, we begin to rebuild in a postmodern culture (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 28-29).

Even in this time of liminality, the Emergent movement is gaining a greater sense of definition. Jones has sought to provide some more clarity and definition to the movement. In *The New Christians*, Jones cites the four values and their attendant practices that are commonly shared among members of the Emergent Village, a key network in this global movement. Says Jones, “In the language of a religious order, we call these four values our ‘order and rule’” (2008, 222-226):

- a commitment to following God in the ways of Jesus, with particular emphasis on Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God;
- a commitment to honour and serve the church in all of its forms and traditions;
- a commitment to follow Christ into the world and be committed to seeking the restoration of God’s world; and
- a commitment to respectful conversation and dialogue with all who participate in this growing global movement.

Building on this need for greater definition, Phyllis Tickle is calling Emergent leaders to boldly articulate the new form of Christianity that she sees arising at this transitional time in the history of Christianity. In the closing words of *The Great Emergence*, Tickle writes of Emergent leaders, “They must begin now to think with intention about what this new form of the faith is and is to become; because what once was an emerging but innocuous phenomenon no longer is. The cub has grown into the young lion; and now is the hour of his roaring” (Tickle 2008, 163).

### 3. KEY PRACTICES OF THIS MOVEMENT

For such a diverse and growing movement, it is challenging to summarize the key practices of churches that are being shaped by and participating in this movement. We can begin with the following key practices, core to the movement.

The first Emergent practice can be broadly described as “following the ways of Jesus in the world.” A few things stand out as part of this core practice. First, an emphasis is placed on seeing the gospel of the kingdom of God as the key to understanding not only Jesus’ proclamations but also his lifestyle and practices (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 47-8). There is a strong emphasis on

every disciple of Jesus being called to follow Jesus in a life that is “on mission,” to erect signs of the kingdom of God in this world.

Emergents see the kingdom of God and our mission within it as larger than the institutional church. Gibbs and Bolger argue, “The church is not necessarily the centre of God’s intentions. God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not” (2005, 42). Adding to this emphasis, Emergents see mission primarily as the mission of God, *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* is seen as God’s effort to renew all of creation; and therefore, many would define the task of those who follow Jesus as seeking to discern our place in this mission of God in the world. Gibbs and Bolger summarize this core practice well:

In Jesus, they [emerging churches] discovered a long-forgotten gospel, the idea that we have an invitation to participate with God in the redemption of the world. Emerging Churches accepted this offer, and they joined the *missio Dei*, God’s outward movement to humanity. Jesus announced the kingdom of God, and this is the message emerging churches seek to proclaim in their newly formed missional communities (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 64).

A second key Emergent practice is what Gibbs and Bolger refer to as “transforming secular space.” What is primarily at stake here is a very intentional desire to foster practices that deconstruct the sacred/secular dichotomy that has been inherited in the West from the Enlightenment tradition. Borrowing heavily from Gibbs and Bolger, consider some of the implications of “transforming secular space” that are often noted by Emergent leaders. The first is the drive to see all of life as sacred space. “Church” becomes not so much an institution, a place, or a people, but rather signals intentional practices of life that become part of a sacred rhythm of fellowship and service. Second, there is a desire for so-called “secular life” to become infused into our spirituality, our worship, and our so-called “sacred” spaces (e.g. mainstream music becoming part of our “worship music” and providing clues for liturgical practices of confession, etc.). Third, there is an intentional move from systematic to non-linear ways of thinking, telling the truth and reading the biblical text. This includes an emphasis on truth as embodied – hearing what God is doing concretely in the lives of people. There is an aversion to propositional language and monological speech to communicate truth. A fourth implication of this is a desire to see non-textual ways of communicating and embodying the gospel. An emphasis is placed on aural and visual forms of communication and embodiment of truth. Fifth is the focus on “incarnational engagement with culture,” to practice embodiment of truth in our culture. Finally, Emergents seek what Ray Anderson has described as “secular sacrament” (Anderson 2006, 104-105). Brian McLaughlin describes it this way: “[The] secular sacrament of the kingdom of God involves living life in the manner intended by God, but does not necessarily include personal salvation in the process . . . the mission of God’s people is to be a kingdom blessing to the world, not necessarily a soteriological blessing” (2008, 107).

A third key Emergent practice is *emphasizing community*. When it comes to thinking about the church as a community, the focus for many in the Emergent movement is on the kingdom of God, and the church’s relationship to the Kingdom becomes a defining core for its ecclesiology. That relationship emphasizes the church as a people who are sent out into the world seven days a week to embody the life of the kingdom of God, in contrast to the church as a people gathered one day a week for worship. Stress is placed on the church as the community called to be a servant and sign of the kingdom, being the community of those who are called together in order to be sent into the world as witnesses. Emergent churches see the need to deconstruct church practices in light of this. We must be willing to question all church practices and ask how they can serve or be part of the kingdom mission of the church (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 96).

A fourth area of key Emergent practices concerns the hospitality and practices of inclusion. The following practices are part of this theme: the Eucharist as a central act of worship, with the emphasis on the meal as a place of hospitality and welcome to the stranger; creating safe places for community gatherings with an emphasis on the gathering for corporate worship as a safe place for inclusion of the stranger and outsider; a softening of boundaries that would tend to exclude others, and intentional fostering of a “come as you are” culture in the local community; a stress on embodied relational evangelism where presence is emphasized before proclamation, changed lives before changed beliefs, and belonging before believing; and the desire through these practices of hospitality and inclusion to embody a public faith that is attractive instead of a privatized faith. Gibbs and Bolger summarize these practices well, “Emerging Churches focus on changed lives rather than changed beliefs. People do not want to be converted, but experiencing the life of the kingdom may be welcomed by many. The focus is to create cultures of the kingdom and to allow God to do the work” (2005, 128-129).

A fifth area of key Emergent practices is in the area of worship. As a brief survey of Dan Kimball’s landmark book on Emergent churches would demonstrate, issues and habits of worship have been a key area of practices that Emergent church leaders have focused on.<sup>3</sup> Some of the key practices that stand out in this area include: a critique for what is seen as the way in which modernity made church “non-participatory” in many established patterns of worship and worship gatherings (e.g. seating arrangements, centrality of pulpit, etc.); a desire to practice worship as a place where people share journeys and offer up their lives to each other and that cannot therefore be dominated by one person from the front; a movement to dialogical preaching models and methods instead of monologue; and the ongoing tension of seeking full participation in corporate gatherings in practice, while trying not to succumb to the dangers of becoming insular and non-missional in a desire to stay small and ensure high levels of participation (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 156-172).

A sixth area of key practices relates to the arts. In Emergent churches a high value is placed upon creativity and using the full range of creative gifts in the community. There is emphasis on the importance of everyone being able to create and contribute toward the corporate expressions of worship and to use of all the various arts in the worship gathering and life of the community. Beyond the corporate experiences of the community, Emergent churches also seek deep cultural engagement with the arts and creative gifts (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 173-190).

A seventh key practice is the re-thinking of leadership practices and roles. Leadership practices within Emergent churches tend strongly toward non-hierarchical models of church leadership. Leadership shifts to a more facilitative role, with many emerging churches experimenting with the idea of “leaderless groups.” Leaders as facilitators are to create space for the group to discern its calling and embody the various practices highlighted here. Power is diffused throughout the group. Decision-making is on a consensual basis (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 192-213). McLaughlin summarizes these practices around leadership well: “This type of leadership flattens the typical modern hierarchy and creates a community in which ‘all members help make decisions and take turns leading, actions that serve as a counter to the control and oppressive tendencies of modernity’” (McLaughlin 2008, 109).

Finally, an eighth key Emergent practice is the renewal of ancient spiritualities. Gibbs and Bolger highlight the rediscovery among Emergent church leaders of ancient practices and disciplines of spirituality. Celtic and other contemplative traditions, including those of Ignatius

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<sup>3</sup>A huge portion of Kimball’s 2003 book on Emerging Church is dedicated to the way Emerging Churches are experimenting with worship and different models preaching (eight of the 11 chapters in part two are on these issues). We should also recall that the U.K. expression of the Emergent church movement was initially largely an alternative worship movement.

like *Lectio Divina* and the *Examen*, are reflected in the practices of discernment, reflection and meditation, and communal listening to God's spoken word. Monastic orders are also taken by many Emergent churches, leading to what has been called a "neo-monasticism": a truly eclectic spirituality from a variety of ecclesiastical and theological traditions, most of which are largely pre-modern in nature (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 217-234).

#### 4. KEY THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL EMPHASES

##### 4.1 Relationship between gospel and culture

The Emergent church movement prioritizes the need to understand deeply the relationship between the gospel and culture in the West today. This is largely not a philosophical or theoretical problem, but rather is focused on relating the gospel to people in our culture who find themselves presently outside of the institutional church.<sup>4</sup> Yet it must be noted that even though many leaders in this movement see themselves as being largely pragmatic, theological and philosophical assumptions do of course underlie their practice and are embedded in their practices.

Brian McLaren has led the way for this movement on this issue. As McLaren puts it, we are living in a changed world where enormous cultural shifts have taken place, and so we need a changed church, or at least new maps for the church and new kinds of churches (2000, 11-17). McLaren argues that it is important for the church in the West today to emphasize the discontinuity of the cultural shift we are experiencing from modernity to postmodernity. This discontinuity will help us realize more clearly and decisively that we need re-invented churches in the West, not renewed or restored churches. The emphasis among Emergent leaders is on the prophetic and provocative posture toward culture and cultural change in the West (McKnight 2006, 2007). McLaren does not simply highlight discontinuity, he also emphasizes the importance of engaging in our postmodern world in light of numerous opportunities that postmodernity provides the church, and allowing the postmodern world to deconstruct the "modern viruses" that have plagued the church today (2000, 159-198).

As McKnight points out, within the Emergent church movement, there are three postures taken in relationship to postmodern culture. The first is a critical stance toward postmodernity in which the stress is placed on doing ministry *to* postmoderns, often with a very sharp edge that emphasizes the dangers of the postmodern situation. The second posture is a mildly critical stance in which we seek to do ministry *with* postmoderns, seeing postmodernism largely as the cultural context within which we are called to live out the gospel. The third is the posture of those who seem largely devoid of criticism about postmodernism and instead are seeking to do ministry *as* postmoderns, largely embracing much of the postmodern story. As McKnight laments, this third group gets much of the publicity and criticism in light of the tendency toward polarities and false dichotomies that this group embodies (2007, 3).<sup>5</sup>

Jones argues that the Emergent movement is critically concerned with unmasking the ways in which the gospel has been domesticated by modernity and the Enlightenment

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4 Dan Kimball's recent *They Like Jesus but Hate the Church* is a good example here, looking in detail at some of the key cultural barriers that often keep postmoderns outside the institutional church (2007).

5 McKnight puts it this way: "They love either-or claims, especially when one side wins and the other side loses – as in 'relational rather than rational.' While I think such language is much more often a ranking of truths by the *via negativa* rather than some superficial false dichotomy, no one can dispute that the emerging folks have at times embraced such language in order to create a clear divide and to pound in some stakes. False dichotomies might be the opiate of the emerging style; as for opiates, it has to be one of the more charming ones" (2006, 13).

project. The movement largely began by wrestling with the implications of postmodernity and deconstructionism for the church in the West today, particularly in order to identify the assumptions of modernity and the Enlightenment operative in the church in the West (Jones 2008, 40-43).<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.2 Disillusionment with modern forms

A second theological emphasis within the Emergent church movement is a growing disillusionment with the modern forms of church and established churches. McLaren argues for totally reinvented churches (2000). Bolger suggests that one of the key characteristics of the Emergent church movement, in contrast particularly with the Missional Church movement, is what he describes as disillusionment with ecclesiology and the church (2007). And Jones has put it perhaps even more starkly, when he suggests that the church in the West today is simply dead; the modern church has outlived itself and its usefulness to God (2008, 4). Jones highlights at several points how the Emergent church movement finds the modern forms of church problematic. Emergents work to move beyond the differences that have divided Christians in the modern period, especially the fundamentalist and liberal camps. Emergents want to emphasize a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contributions of all branches of Christianity and seeks to form something new that will be inclusive of the diverse branches. Wanting to move beyond the way the modern church has become over-institutionalized and bureaucratic, Emergents believe the church should function more like an open-source network. This “open-source network” way of functioning will provide for the whole community open access to all learning and instruction, over against the teacher- or preacher-dominated models of the modern church. The pastor should be seen as a broker of a conversation and dialogue, not the primary speaker. Leadership structures should be flattened out. Jones summarizes much of this posture by suggesting that often Emergents are starting new churches in order to save their own faith, not necessarily as an outreach strategy (2008, 197). The disillusionment with the established and modern forms of church threatens to undo the faith of the Emergents; newer expressions are needed to save their faith. The Emergent movement is a post-institutional church movement in many ways, and is leading to a growing call to re-examine the institutional church in the West today.<sup>7</sup>

One of the more theological arguments within this movement is a small but very influential book by Pete Ward entitled *Liquid Church*. In this book, Ward’s concern is for a renewal and reformation of the church in order for it to be an effective agent in changing our culture. He describes “liquid” as a new way of being God’s people in worship and in mission where the emphasis is placed on the church as primarily a network of people and relationships and communications, but not as a gathering of people that meet at a certain time and place. Ward wants to see a shift from thinking about church as structures, institutions, and meetings to thinking about church in less formal ways. He argues that there will be three implications to this type of shift: first, we will discover that the church is not an institution; second, we will realize that “church” happens whenever people communicate with each other; and third, the emphasis will be placed on living as Christ’s body in the world, with no weekly gathering together required for this (Ward 2002, 2-4). Ward argues that Paul’s nuanced use of the word ἐκκλησία and his

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<sup>6</sup> Given this emphasis on questions and issues of gospel and culture, it is striking to note the absence of a well articulated model for contextualization, which is what this whole issue raises from a missiological perspective. The absence of such a critical tool as this, as well as the absence of a well-articulated understanding of the nature of culture, has hindered the Emergent church movement in its engagement with and understanding of the cultural context in the West today.

<sup>7</sup> There is a growing amount of literature being spawned by this growing disillusionment. See Sanders 2007, Cunningham 2006, Duin 2008, Viola and Barna 2008, and Kinnaman and Lyons 2007.

understanding of the church as the body of Christ provide us with liquid, organic notions of what the church is and move us beyond the static and “solid church” ecclesologies of the past (2002, 7-8). Ward concludes by arguing that we need a “liquid reformation” of the structures and social organization of the church in the West, because the liquid culture in which we live moves us to engage in what God is doing in the world beyond and outside of the institutional church (2002, 10-16).

#### **4.3 Instrumental view of the church**

A third theological emphasis for the Emergent movement is the growing instrumental view of the church. That is, within the *missio Dei*, Emergents tend to marginalize the place of the church: it either serves the larger purposes of the kingdom of God or, if it is unable or unwilling to do so, is bypassed.

Doug Pagitt argues that there are essentially three types of responses to the cultural shifts in the West today. The first option is that the church can seek to return to the Reformation and seek to hold onto tradition; the second option is that the church can seek to make deep systemic changes, but in the end still see itself as the centre of God’s mission and thus avoid significant theological changes as it relates to the role and identity of the church; and the third option is to embrace the reality that the church is not necessarily the centre of God’s intentions, but rather to see that God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not in his mission in the world (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 42). Pagitt argues that the church has no privileged place in God’s mission, and must continually orient itself toward the world so that it might participate in what God is doing, wherever it might find God at work in the world (2007, 131). The focus must be on engaging in the work of the kingdom of God wherever that work might be. The church may be an instrument in God’s kingdom purposes, but the church is not essential nor necessarily the main instrument God will use.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4.4 Epistemological assumptions**

A fourth key emphasis found within the Emergent church movement concerns its shared epistemological assumptions, reacting to the foundationalism and rationalism of modernity that has affected the church in the West. Emergents are particularly keen to expose the ways in which the modernity of the West has shaped the way the church has approached its theology and practices.

Emergents argue that language is “non-representational” (McLaren 2000, 66). That is, our minds are not a mirror of reality and our language and thoughts do not therefore represent a neutral, unbiased representation of objective reality that is external to our minds. Rather, we are profoundly limited and shaped by our perspective and social location. Theologizing, as a result, should be seen as an art, not as a rigid science that seeks to provide dogmatic certainty. We need to develop a different rhetoric when we speak and do theology; a rhetoric where our words are simpler, softer, and fewer (McLaren 2000, 89).

Connected to this is a growing emphasis placed on *mystery* as an important epistemological category. Our words should be seen as servants of the mysteries of faith, not as a tool to articulate all the answers. Certainty must give way to mystery and answers must be trumped by more

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8 Scot McKnight disagrees, arguing that the lack of clarity about the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church in the Emergent movement presents a major weakness: “According to the New Testament, the kingdom vision of Jesus is, it seems, only implemented through the church. Only in the community of Jesus does one hear about the problem of Adam and Eve’s rebellion and the need for resolution through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit ... We need more reflection by Emergents on the relationship of kingdom and church” (2008a, 5).

questions. Combined with this is the growing deconstructionist perspective on tradition, which leads many Emergents to be especially sensitive to the ways that modernity has domesticated the church and the gospel in the West. These “modern viruses,” to use McLaren’s language, must be deconstructed so that the church can be freed from the epistemological assumptions of the past. Thus, we must learn to embrace the postmodern aversion to certainty, the sensitivity to context, and the importance of our own subjectivity (McLaren 2000, 162-164).

Jones adds further nuance with some additional assumptions that are shaping this movement. First, Jones argues that an envelope of friendship and reconciliation must surround all debates about doctrine and dogma, instead of the modernist concern for right doctrine that sought to emphasize correct thinking in a way that divides (2008, 78-9). Second, we must place emphasis on the local, conversational, and temporary nature of all of our theologizing. Complexity is highlighted, averting our tendency to simplify and “nail-down” mysterious theological concepts (2008, 112-114). Third, we must become increasingly aware of our relative position to God, to one another, and to history in such a way that this awareness breeds a humility open to dialogue and ongoing discovery (2008, 115, 140-42). Fourth, Emergents believe that truth, like God, cannot be definitively articulated by finite human beings. We must be willing to embrace paradox and a wider rationality that allows space for the imagination, creativity, intuition, emotions, and dialogue (2008, 153-159).

#### **4.5 Biblical-theological starting point**

A fifth emphasis that must be briefly mentioned is the biblical-theological starting point for mission. It is striking that the majority of Emergent leaders take as their starting point for biblical and theological reflection on mission one of the following:

- *The mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.* The so-called “incarnational model” of Jesus’ life becomes a starting point for the church to follow Jesus in its desire to “incarnate” the gospel in our culture.
- *The life and practices of Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry.* Great emphasis is put on how Jesus’ life and ministry was centred around the kingdom of God and his engagement with the world in his life and ministry. The church is then called to continue the kingdom practices of Jesus in its own context today.
- *Missio Dei.* As noted above, this tends to move in a direction that emphasizes God’s relationship with the world and his work outside the church, presenting the church with the option of joining God’s mission in the world or being passed by in that mission

What is lacking in all of these starting points is a robust biblical-theological understanding of the mission of the church that at the same time does full justice to the biblical understanding of the *missio Dei*, the kingdom of God, and the OT mission of Israel as it relates to the mission of God’s people in the NT.

#### **4.6 Praxis oriented**

As Scot McKnight argues, the Emergent church movement has a praxis oriented emphasis (2007, 3), especially in three key spheres. First, worship: Emergents like creative, experiential worship that seeks to challenge many of the assumptions and practices that have shaped the modern expressions of public worship gatherings – especially preferring participatory dialogue in place of monological preaching, as well as inclusive seating arrangements and other intentional steps to encourage experiential participation in the worship event.

Second is orthopraxis. Emergents focus more on faith practices beliefs. In fact, there is in

many cases an aversion toward tying down a strict orthodoxy filled with doctrinal content. Peter Rollins puts it this way: “. . . orthodoxy is no longer (mis)understood as the opposite of heresy but rather is understood as a term that signals a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world” (2006, 3). How a person lives will be more important than what a person believes. Emphasis is placed squarely on the need to live the right way, embodying the ways of Jesus rather than the teachings of Jesus (McKnight 2007, 4).

And third is missional living. The Emergent church movement overlaps with the Missional Church movement in this regard, and shares a concern for the church’s concrete participation in the life of local communities. This is participation where God’s redemptive work is already occurring, in the holistic redemptive work of God to bring (McKnight 2007, 4).

## 5. GROWING DIVERSITY

The Emergent movement is marked by a growing diversity, and is increasingly difficult to define. McKnight suggests measuring the diversity within the movement in large part by distinguishing how “soft” or “hard” the postmodern tendencies are among those in the movement. “Softness” would characterize those who are more critical of the postmodern story, while “hardness” would characterize those who are perceived to uncritically embrace much of the postmodern story (McKnight 2006, 10-14).

The growing diversity within the movement presents a challenge to those who would seek to define it. However, for those within the movement, the diversity is noted and celebrated, including in a recent collection of essays, *Emergent Manifesto*, which draws together over 25 different voices from the growing “Emergent Village,” an online forum for the Emergent church movement. Jones summarizes well the contribution this book brings:

I hope that you can see the beauty in the mess that is this book. It’s not one, univocal message. But, seriously, who would want a garden of all green beans? No, you’ve got to have variety, and that’s what you’ll find in the pages that follow. What is Emergent Village? A mess. A beautiful, *good mess* (Pagitt and Jones 2007, 15).

While fully aware of this growing diversity, the key practices and emphases described above clarify what might be termed a centre of the movement. Likewise, Phyllis Tickle, in her recent *The Great Emergence*, seek to define what she terms an “Emergent Centre:” a networked authority marked by its egalitarianism and its practices of open source discernment, “wait[ing] upon the Spirit and rest[ing] in the interlacing lives of Bible-listening, Bible-honouring believers;” a distrust for metanarratives and logic; a belief in paradox and mystery; a relational concept of reality and the human self; and a desire to “re-write” Christian theology into something Jewish, paradoxical, narrative, and mystical. Tickle acknowledges the necessary deconstruction phase through which this movement has passed, but calls on the leaders of this movement to move boldly into the future by bringing greater definition and clarity to the new faith that is emerging from within the Emergent movement (Tickle 2008, 162-163).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Emergent Church Movement surfaced in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an important movement that needs to be engaged deeply since its goal is to move beyond the perceived dichotomies of liberalism and fundamentalism. Surface treatments and knee-jerk reactions will not help equip the church in the West to engage in discernment of its missional identity and vocation. Important theological and philosophical questions are being asked by those within this movement. It emphasizes following the ways of Jesus in the world, deconstructs the sacred/

secular dichotomy of the Enlightenment and accentuates community as well as hospitality and inclusion. Thus it is forcing the church in the West to revisit core practices, theological starting points, epistemological assumptions, and ways in which modern and postmodern culture are shaping the church today. It is rethinking worship, the role of creative arts, leadership and the renewal of the ancient spiritualities. Issues for discernment facing the church in the West today are being raised and need to be engaged in order for the church in the West to renew its missional identity and vocation. As such major shifts are taking place in ecclesiology. Emergents have an instrumental view of the church. It should be focused on the *missio Dei*. Epistemologically the movement is decidedly post-foundational, realizing that we need to embrace paradox, live with mystery and that we cannot rationally fully comprehend God as finite human beings. For Emergents, doing theology starts with the Bible is praxis oriented and missionally focused. As the movement is in a liminal phase it marked by a growing diversity.

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**KEY WORDS**

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**TREFWOORDE**

Ontluikende kerk  
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missio Dei  
ekkesiologie.

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