



Emergent Village resources for communities of faith

*An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*  
edited by Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (April 2007)

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# AN **EMERGENT** **MANIFESTO OF HOPE**

edited by **DOUG PAGITT + TONY JONES**



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**ēmer**ersion is a partnership between Baker Books and Emergent Village, a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The ēmerersion line is intended for professional and lay leaders like you who are meeting the challenges of a changing culture with vision and hope for the future. These books will encourage you and your community to live into God's kingdom here and now.

The first of these books, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, brings you the voices of those who are shaping the emergent conversation. Some are men and women who have been working out an emerging theology for decades. Others represent the next wave of Christian thought and practice. Both the veterans and the up-and-comers represent the essence of the Emergent Village—optimistic, passionate, hard-to-ignore.

Through their discussions of topics such as reconciliation, humanity, sexuality, and evangelism, these pastors and practitioners give you a glimpse of the ways in which the people of Emergent Village are changing what it means to live as a Christian in this age. You might not agree with everything they have to say, but you will come away from this conversation with a deeper understanding of the hopeful imagination that drives the emerging church.



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incentives for individuals to plan for this type of personal and professional development? The upfront costs are high. The long-term outlook is uncertain when one prepares for leadership within a church in which organizing principles are in flux.

### Beyond the Merger Model

There is an irony in the merger-church transformation that seems lost on many who are participating in it. In fighting to preserve the parish as base unit, we are losing the relational intimacy that makes parishes so appealing as social and cultural centers in the first place.

American Catholicism is undergoing a dramatic transformation. There is a conversation that appears absent in the midst of the rush to merger-size American Catholicism. What are the implications for how the average lay Catholic will live out a life of faith in the merger-community? Is it possible for a community to become larger and more relational at the same time? How does the church prevent the needs of individuals from falling through the cracks? From where will the new form of leadership required to lead the larger organizations come? What are the roles of priests, laity, and religious in the new structure?

There is a rich tradition of diverse organizational possibilities from which the American Catholic Church can draw as it discerns how best to empower nearly a quarter of all Americans to respond to their baptismal call. Exploring these options will require the church to rethink how leadership is identified and formed. It will require creativity and courage to rethink the most basic assumptions that are conjured when using words like *church*, *pastor*, and *parish*. It will take the insight to look beyond the poverty of the shortages that are initiating the move to merger-size the church into a mere facsimile of the megachurch up the street. A truly "universal" church should embrace all of these possibilities, for then Catholics will live up to the definition of their name.

# PRESBYMERGENT

The Story of One Mainliner's Quest  
to Be a Loyal Radical

ADAM WALKER

CLEVELAND

10

**W**e sat on the front steps of her house in Hagerman, Idaho, and I shared my plans to attend Princeton Theological Seminary in the fall. I had visited the school, enjoyed the community, and decided Princeton was where I would further my theological education. I explained the various perceived benefits of attending Princeton, but she was not convinced. Finally, my friend looked at me and said, “Why on earth are you going to Princeton? Isn’t that the most *un*-Emergent school there is?” And there it was. I had just recently become an avid blogger and involved in this new movement, conversation, or whatever it was, and apparently I had chosen the school that was “the man” and would indoctrinate me into “the system,” and I would lose all chances of ever becoming Emergent. At best, I was *submerging*.

## Becoming Presbyterian

Before I begin to explain how I became involved with Emergent, it’s important to understand one thing about my denominational heritage: it’s a mixed bag. In his early twenties my father became a Christian through a Plymouth Brethren gathering in Kentucky, and my mother grew up in a large Mennonite family on an Illinois farm. I was dedicated (not baptized) as an infant in a Presbyterian Church (PC USA), and I went to a Nazarene church youth group in junior high, an Assemblies of God youth group in high school, and a variety of mainline, evangelical, and

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nondenominational churches in college. To say I’m a denominational mutt is probably an understatement.

When someone asks how I chose to become Presbyterian, I usually shrug my shoulders and say something to the effect of “It seems to be the place that I’ve ended up—God must have something to do with that.” Throughout my life, I’ve had a connection to PC (USA)—affiliated churches, colleges, and summer camps. After college graduation, I eventually found myself serving as director of youth ministries for a PC (USA) church in Wendell, Idaho. It’s been an interesting journey, to say the least. As a freshman religion major, one of the most vexing theological crises I encountered was the question of God’s will: what *was* God’s will for my life? Through the counsel of a professor, I was able to see that the will of God was not one of life’s ultimate secrets or a hidden treasure that needed to be carefully sought after. Rather, the will of God was in fact a way of life, a way of looking at the world, a way of relating to God and to the others in my life. Once I realized this, the questions that had been so debilitating for me, such as which Christian summer camp I would work at for the summer, became superfluous. While I still sought counsel and advice from close friends and family on major life decisions, I didn’t let those decisions cause me much frustration. It was this new way of looking at the world that led me to the edge of a riverbank at Thousand Springs in Wendell, where I was about to be immersed into icy cold waters on Palm Sunday, my twenty-third birthday. I would arise a new creation, a baptized believer, a Presbyterian.

## Remaining Presbyterian

I write this now as a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA), a seminarian at the largest PC (USA) seminary, and someone who is currently a candidate of the Presbyterian ordination process. I’m also an active blogger and I often receive emails from people who find my blog while searching for information related to Emergent, the PC (USA), or Princeton Seminary. The emails generally read something like this: “I grew up Presbyterian and am now a youth worker at a Presbyterian church. Yet I really resonate with a lot of this Emergent stuff I’m reading. So I’m not really sure what to do. I see you’re both into Emergent stuff and also a Presbyterian. I’m writing to find out why you want to stay Presbyterian.”

One recent email came from someone who was struggling to be, in his words, a faithful “Presbymergent.”

In drafting my responses to these inquiries, I’ve needed to think seriously about what draws me to the Presbyterian Church. One of the questions on my application to become a candidate for ordination asked, “What does it mean to be Presbyterian?” When I think about how to answer this question, part of the answer stems from the fact that I have just sort of “ended up” here in this season of my life through my education, jobs, and friendships. In fact this is the answer I gave to my session (the governing board of a Presbyterian congregation) as I began the ordination process. When an Orthodox priest friend reflected on it with me, he sat silent for a moment and then said, “Well, that’s okay, Adam. That tells me how you got here. But it tells me nothing about what’s going to keep you here.”

What is going to keep me in the Presbyterian Church? Honestly, there are some days I find myself asking that question more often than others. While I see the benefits of a process of ordination and the strict prerequisites (exams, psychological assessments, years of meeting with committees), it often feels more like a painful process of jumping through the right hoops than a helpful or Spirit-led process. Also many say the PC (USA) is dying; we lost around forty-one thousand members in 2004 alone. So why stay?

The first thing that comes to mind is the friendships that have developed during my time in the Presbyterian Church. Through intimate small groups during college and seminary, close mentors who were both professors and pastors, and fellow staff members at the camps where I spent summers, I have consistently been with people who have encouraged, challenged, and spoken truth into my life. Along the same lines, it’s important to mention how significant the role of community is to the Presbyterian Church. A former pastor I worked with once said, “It’s impossible to be a Presbyterian lone ranger.” And really, it’s true. The importance of community is ingrained in the Presbyterian system and reflected throughout our committees, polity, and potlucks. When I decided to begin the ordination process, my church’s session recommended that I become an Inquirer (one who is “inquiring” about becoming a Presbyterian minister), and then the Committee on Preparation for Ministry recommended me to the Presbytery (the regional governing body). Both times, after interviewing me, they laid hands on me and prayed for me. The experience of having people lay hands on me and pray for my discernment and for God and God’s Spirit to lead me was a beautiful

picture of a community joining together to help guide someone through the process of discerning his call and future vocation.

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*: The church reformed and always reforming (or always being reformed). This is the Presbyterian and Reformed rallying cry. It reminds Presbyterians of the church’s history and tradition, as well as the necessity to continue to be open to new waves of the Spirit. I appreciate that the Presbyterian Church is rooted in history. Presbyterians have a rich theological history and played a significant role in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Being part of a denomination that has significant historical roots gives one the sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself. When people realize their faith in God is much more than just a personal, individual decision, that they belong to a great “cloud of witnesses” of those who have gone before them, their vision of the church is both deepened and enlarged.

The church, as she finds herself in new and uncharted waters, needs to be able to adapt to different contexts, to continually reform. The motto above is sometimes clarified by adding *secundum verbi Dei*, so it means “the church reformed and always being reformed, according to the Word of God.” Again, because of the communal nature of Presbyterians, change does not come about solely through an individual. Change and continual reformation come about through communities being guided by Word and Spirit, seeking to bring about the kingdom of God in a changing world. And there is plenty of room in Reformed theology to allow for an open and organic vision of church; I know of a few PC (USA) churches that are striving to meet the changing needs in their contexts and are becoming very creative in the ways they are seeking to minister. (The Portico in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Wicker Park Grace, in Chicago, are two examples.) Presbyterian ministers are now beginning to see new ways by which we can continue reforming the church. As with so many aspects of the Christian life, the ongoing reformation of the church is a journey and a process—a process that I, and many others, hope to join.

### Becoming Emergent

Early in the morning on the last day of the National Youth Workers Convention, I slowly walked through a prayer labyrinth, a large maze-like path that was drawn out on a canvas that blanketed the floor of a

dimly lit room. The accompanying audio CD instructed me to be still, to begin a journey inward, to become self-aware, to commune with the Divine, and then to journey outward. I looked in a mirror, dropped a stone in a bucket, and stepped in a sandbox. Each act had meaning. Each of the everyday objects took on new significance. I was not just dropping a rock into a bucket; I was relinquishing my fears, my doubts, and my concerns to God and receiving God's grace and peace. As I left the labyrinth that morning, I felt refreshed, still, and peaceful; I had encountered God in a new way.

I'll be the first to admit it: I am a convention junkie. I love the name tags, the freebies, the schedules, the networking. I attended the first Emergent convention in San Diego and found a group of people who were struggling with issues I struggled with, who were working hard to think of creative and new ways to worship, to think theologically, and to be the church in the world today. I was intrigued first by ideas of how worship could be done differently; I fell into awe of all things *alt. worship*. The *alt. worship* (alternative worship) movement began in Europe and was a way to create ways of connecting liturgy and worship experiences with new media. While *alt. worship* was certainly my gateway drug into Emergent, it became clear to me that Emergent was about much more than just this. Some in the emergent community seek authentic and creative ways of worshiping God today. Others seek an alternative vision for how to be a politically and socially conscious Christian. Still others continue looking at our theologies and ways of thinking and ask questions about what a new theology might look like in our changing world today. These projects excited me and continue to give me hope that Emergent and the church emerging are working to share the Good News of God's kingdom and to open that vision up for those who may not have been open to it before. That is something worth investing in.

### Remaining Emergent

When it comes to thinking about the future, being involved with the emerging church seems to be a pretty natural step for me. For many reasons, the emerging church atmosphere, ethos, and trajectory just make sense to me. One of the joys of becoming more involved with the Emergent conversation has been the friendships I've been able to

establish through emails, blogs, conventions, smaller gatherings, and regional cohorts. These friends helped and encouraged me as I was going through many changes in my thoughts on faith and church while being fairly isolated in southern Idaho.

One of the things I appreciate most about these friendships is the unspoken understanding that it is acceptable to question, critique, and deconstruct much of what we think and believe. Many today have more questions than answers, and the church has not always done a good job of creating safe places for people to ask questions and share concerns. Whether one is part of a more conservative evangelical congregation that is not open to questioning certain doctrines or a mainline Protestant church that is not open to questioning certain traditions or the way things have always been done, churches today often do not present themselves as being open to critique and deconstruction. I am grateful for the space Emergent has given to those like me who have been desperate to find a safe place for this process.

Those involved in the emerging church movement are not black-or-white thinkers. We strive to seek alternative visions and third ways beyond the polarities that have so dramatically seeped into our culture and our faith. This involves a true openness to the Spirit and a desire to avoid squelching anything that might be from and of the Spirit. This openness leads to safe places where friendship thrives, where people can come and be involved in the process of deconstructing ideas and practices, all while remaining open to the movements and new waves of the Spirit that can bring about renewal and reformation within the church today.

Some have criticized Emergent for focusing too much on deconstruction, implying that somehow Emergent will prove itself to be nothing more than one more fatalistic nihilism. It is clear to me, though, that Emergent's deconstruction is simply a necessary means to an end, and that end is clearly reconstruction, revitalization, and reform—the emergence of a new way of being Christian and a new way of being the church.

### Identity and Creativity

So where does this leave those of us who find ourselves sitting on the fence between mainline denominations and those churches and groups

within the church emerging? Is it necessary to choose between the two, or is there a way to integrate these two streams of the faith?

That integration may be found in a phrase used by Bob Hopkins, who copioneered the Anglican Church Planting Initiatives with his wife, Mary, in the United Kingdom. When asked about how those in mainline theological education could be interacting with those students interested in Emergent expressions of faith, Hopkins said mainline churches need to be encouraging and supporting “loyal radicals,” those who stay on the *inside* to bring about creative, emergent expressions of historic faith.

In our North American context, it could be tempting for those who have grown up in mainline churches to leave their denominations so they can pursue more creative ways of being the church. However, if all leaders who felt frustrated by aspects of the PC (USA) were to leave, there would be an even greater denominational crisis. The PC (USA) knows it cannot afford to lose new leaders, so some mainline Presbyterians are finding renewed interest in church planting through the New Church Development Office of the PC (USA) and granting more freedom to those who want to create new expressions of the Presbyterian faith. Hopkins hopes that mainline and traditional denominations will create the freedom and permission-giving space for more nontraditional leaders to be able to stay within their denomination and bring about fresh expressions of a faith that is rooted in tradition.

One of the joys (for some) and frustrations (for others) of Emergent is that it is very hard to say, “This is what Emergent believes about X.” There is great diversity of theological and methodological beliefs within Emergent. Some within Emergent do, in fact, have problems with the institutional aspect of mainline churches. They see them as standing in the way of vision, reform, and creative emergence within the church today. However, that is not the official Emergent stance by any means. There are many within the emerging church conversation who are deeply connected to mainline denominations. They believe mainline denominations have much to offer the emerging church movement, just as the emerging church has much to offer in return. Future pastors are yearning to be given the permission to be loyal radicals within their respective denominations. Each person has different reasons for remaining loyal to his or her tradition, while still being open to new movements within the broader Christian culture. Whatever the reason, it is important that these

people be given the room to follow their calling to discover creative and new ways of being the mainline church in the twenty-first century.

I believe the PC (USA) has room for loyal radicals. It is not necessarily easy to be a grassroots or subversive voice in this context, but I doubt it would be easier in a different context. The problems of another environment (in a nondenominational church plant, for example) may be different from those in this environment, but they would still be problems. And I’m encouraged to hear of (and from) many in the PC (USA) who realize how much they stand to benefit from loyal radicals.

I am committed to the Presbyterian Church (USA). I choose to stay, as do many other Emergent thinkers in mainline denominations. Yet our staying may well lead to expressions of mainline faith that look far different from more familiar expressions. I trust and hope that mainline leaders will see these emerging expressions as reassuring signs of the Holy Spirit still at work in our midst. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.*