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Loyal Radicals: The Intersection of Mainline Denominations and Emerging Christianity

Over the past several decades a movement has been taking shape across numerous sectors of the church, and among many denominations and traditions. For roughly the past ten years this movement has largely been associated with the label “the emerging church” (or some similar variation of the word: emergent, emergence, etc.). It would be a mistake, however, to assume that only those things which wear that explicit label are what are emerging in the twenty-first century church. What has been emerging in Christianity is as diverse as the contexts out of which it is arising, and yet there are some common characteristics shared among the various instances of emergence. Although I will elaborate further on some of these, the most basic definition is that emergents are those Christians who have been questioning and rethinking their received traditions, structures, and theologies, and are beginning to re-imagine and create new versions of the faith that are better adapted to the postmodern context of our twenty-first century world.¹

One question, however, is whether emerging Christianity² has room within it for the various denominational identities, and especially those of the highly institutionalized mainline

¹ “Postmodern” is a complex term with many diverse connotations depending on the field in which it is used. While the emerging conversation within the Christian church does include a substantive engagement with postmodern philosophies – see, for instance, Stanley Grenz and John Franke’s *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), or Bruce Benson’s *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida, & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), among many others – for this paper I will be using a broader definition of postmodernity as a socio-cultural trend in Western society. This trend is largely characterized by a suspicion towards the Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and social progress, a pluralistic blending of diverse beliefs, styles, and cultures, and a flattening of hierarchies and traditional sources of authority.

² I will primarily use the term “emerging Christianity” to talk about the broad trends I am describing here, rather than the more common label “emerging church”, since that term can give the misleading impression that emergents are simply a new splinter group or a singular entity rather than a transformation that is happening at the outer edges of almost *all* segments of the Christian family, across denominations and among non-affiliated Christians, both inside and outside existing institutional structures.

denominations,³ that have so strongly characterized the forms of Christianity that postmodern Christians are emerging from and reacting to. Indeed, a critique of denominationalism is common to many strands of emergent thought, and some have suggested that the church needs to emerge beyond institutionalized forms of Christianity altogether.⁴ Furthermore, given the fact that many of the most vocal groups, churches and individuals who currently self-identify as “emergent” have tended to come out of conservative evangelical backgrounds,⁵ rather than the liberal mainline denominations, it can likewise be confusing as to whether the emerging conversation really has anything to say or offer to the mainline church, or vice versa. Is there an emerging mainline, or are the two identities mutually exclusive? And if emergence is happening in the mainline, what does it look like and what concerns does it spring from? How is emerging Christianity affecting these denominations and what resources (both spiritual and material) do these historic traditions have to offer emergents?

As I hope my research will show, I believe there is an emerging mainline that exists in a creative tension between rootedness in particular tradition and a desire to move forward into the future in new and dynamic ways. Already there are numerous groups within various mainline denominations who are committed to exploring emergent ideas while still remaining loyal to their institutional context. Such groups are creating a kind of meta-denominational convergence of ideas and traditions that could prove very fruitful in the long run. I believe these groups and

³ In talking about the mainline church, I am following the conventional usage of referring to the five historic and predominantly Anglo-American Protestant denominations that have existed with a degree of continuity since, or close to, the founding of the United States – the Episcopal Church (USA), Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ (i.e. Congregationalists), The United Methodist Church, and the American Baptists – and which have largely been receptive to modern critical scholarship of the Bible and liberal theological trends. With this conventional list it is also probably appropriate to include the Disciples of Christ, despite their somewhat later development, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, despite its roots as an immigrant church, because of their present sociological and theological similarities to other mainline denominations.

⁴ See, for instance, Pete Ward’s *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

⁵ For instance, three of the most well known emergent leaders/authors – Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones – all have roots in and significant ties to evangelical Christianity.

the conversation they produce have the potential to help their denominations adapt to the new cultural realities in which they find themselves. On the flip-side of this, I believe that these historic denominations, if they are willing to adapt in these ways, could also serve as a potential haven for emergent minded people and churches who have been uprooted from less accommodating institutions.

Given the many different denominations in question, and the institutional, cultural, and theological diversity that exists among them, this is obviously too large of a topic to deal with comprehensively. Thus in order to describe the intersection of mainline and emerging Christianities, I will focus more specifically on one particular group of emergents within one particular mainline denomination, namely the Presbymergent community within the PC(USA). While other denominational hybrid –mergent groups also exist – Anglimergent, Luthermergent, Methomergent, Baptimergent, etc. – Presbymergent is a good lens through which to view this whole trend, both because Presbymergents themselves (perhaps not surprisingly) are well organized with a specific structure and goals, and some substantial events and accomplishments within their denomination, and because there has been a good amount of individual interest as well as institutional support within the PC(USA) for emergence.⁶ Furthermore, several leading members of Presbymergent have been a part of the larger emerging conversation for some time, and thus are directly connected with the broader trends of emergence happening elsewhere as well. Finally, while emergence naturally looks different within each denomination, Presbyterians have enough theological and institutional similarity with other mainline traditions to make their experience with emergence sufficiently generalizable to other mainline denominations. These

⁶ See, for instance, the statement made by American religious observer and commentator Phyllis Tickle in Becky Garrison's *Rising from the Ashes: Rethinking Church* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007) where she praises the Presbyterians for having been "the most informed, wisest, and most generous in their support of the smaller congregations that are inclined toward emergent sensibilities." (2)

factors make Presbymergent a good test case through which to look at the larger question of mainline emergence.

Before proceeding, however, I should clarify that this paper is intended to be neither a theological evaluation nor a sociological study of mainline emergence, though it may contain some elements of each. My interests and methods, rather, are historical, and my intentions for this project are to create a “first draft” history of mainline emergence in general and Presbymergents in particular. While this movement is too new to be able to provide a thorough analysis, what I wish to provide instead is a first-look at the beginning stages of this movement upon which later historians can build. What is lost through the lack of historical distance will hopefully be made up for through easier access to first-hand accounts and immediate impressions from both direct participants and nearby observers. My goal then is primarily to tell the story as it is experienced by those living it, rather than simply analyzing quantitative data. Likewise, my intent is to be primarily descriptive rather than evaluative. I will be describing a movement, not providing my own opinions of their theology or methods.

Methodologically speaking, I have relied primarily on qualitative research and first-hand descriptions of the movement, whether through books or blogs by Presbymergent leaders, or through direct interviews. I want to listen to the movement-makers themselves, in their own words and through their own writings, in order to provide a broad description of what is happening. This is necessary since there is not much secondary scholarly literature available on this movement, especially in regards to Presbymergent and other denominational –mergent hybrid groups. This is precisely what I hope to contribute with this paper. Ultimately, my goal is to provide some basic analysis of what Presbymergent is, where it fits in the broader emerging movement, and what it tells us about how emergence is happening in the mainline world.

What is Emerging Christianity?

What exactly is emerging Christianity? Tony Jones, former National Coordinator for Emergent Village,⁷ defines it as “The specifically new forms of church life rising from the modern, American church of the twentieth century.”⁸ He goes on to describe the emerging church as a mash-up of new kinds of faith communities and adventurous theology that seeks to engage with postmodern philosophy and culture and move beyond the weaknesses of both mainline and evangelical Christianity, transforming both without wholly rejecting either.⁹ What this means is that emerging Christianity is not simply one thing, but a conversation consisting of many different streams depending on which aspects of contemporary Christianity are brought up for re-examination, whether worship practices, institutional structures, or theology.

Phyllis Tickle, a well-informed observer and commentator on trends within American religion, has outlined a much longer historical trajectory for what she labels “The Great Emergence” in her book by the same name.¹⁰ Emerging Christianity in its most recent American form, however, largely sprang from conversations happening among a handful of evangelical pastors and authors in the mid-nineties who were concerned about the decline in church attendance among younger adults and asked themselves how the church needed to adapt to remain relevant to this segment of the population. Initially the conversation revolved around "generational" differences, and how to reach out to the so-called “Gen Xers.” However, it soon became apparent that the shift was broader than just young people. Western culture (for the most

⁷ Emergent Village is a network of pastors, theologians and other emergent practitioners and friends. For more information visit <http://emergentvillage.com/>.

⁸ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), xix. I should also note, however, as Tony himself does later in the book, that emerging Christianity is not simply an American phenomenon, but is something that is happening globally as well.

⁹ *Ibid*, xviii-xix.

¹⁰ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

part) had been gradually transitioning to a postmodern ethos over the past half-century;¹¹ thus church leaders began asking themselves what church in a postmodern context would look like.¹²

Over the next decade, the movement spread beyond this small handful of influential evangelical leaders through books, conferences, websites, blogs and local discussion groups to a much wider cross-section of both clergy and lay persons across the whole spectrum of Christian denominational and non-denominational identities. This appropriation of new media to bypass traditional gatekeepers of power and information and instead create a radically decentralized, non-hierarchical, and open-sourced movement is one of the key defining characteristics of emerging Christianity. As Phyllis Tickle notes, just as the Protestant Reformation would have been unimaginable without the invention of the printing press, so “it would, quite literally, be impossible to exaggerate the central importance to the Great Emergence of the Internet and World Wide Web.”¹³ The online, viral, “wiki” nature of the movement thereby allowed it to flourish in a much greater diversity of ways and among a much broader cross-section of people than it could have otherwise.

Three Streams: Relevants

As the conversation moved out into the wider church, three overlapping streams of the conversation gradually emerged.¹⁴ One stream, sometimes called “Relevants,” have focused on

¹¹ It should be noted that much of the non-Western world has likewise been experiencing a similar transition to a post-colonial context over the same time frame, and that many of these perspectives were influential in the genesis of North American emerging conversation as well.

¹² While I personally came to the movement in the late nineties just as the discussion was transitioning from generational talk to an engagement with postmodernism, and thus have been privy to and a participant in some of these conversations myself, Tony Jones also provides a detailed description of some of the specific gatherings and discussions that explicitly kicked off what would become the “emerging church” movement in the United States, in his book *The New Christians*, 41-54.

¹³ Tickle, 53.

¹⁴ Numerous taxonomies of the emerging movement exist, many of which utilize some variation of these three categories. The particular labels that I use here originate with Southern Baptist missiologist and church planting guru Ed Stetzer, from a 2006 article he wrote for the *SBC Baptist Press* (“Understanding the emerging church,” January 6, 2006, <http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406> (accessed April 1, 2010). Stetzer labels his third

worship styles and new ways of "doing church." For instance, many assumed that to reach a postmodern generation, churches would have to make their worship multi-sensory, participatory, and just plain "cool" (e.g. coffee, candles, art, multi-media displays, hip music, pop-cultural references, ancient liturgical elements, and the like). However, the point wasn't to be "trendy" so much as it was the missionary impulse to contextualize the gospel and worship to the local culture - in this case, early 21st century postmodern culture with all its impulses towards eclecticism, holism, and authenticity. Influences here came from the field of missiology, and especially "missional" theologians like Lesslie Newbigin, Darrell Guder and David Bosch who helped convince many church leaders that principles utilized by missionaries when communicating the gospel to foreign cultures could also be applied to our own Western postmodern culture.¹⁵ Among emergents from non-liturgical backgrounds there was a rediscovery of the liturgy and other ancient spiritual practices, largely through the help of scholars such as Robert Webber who introduced his "ancient-future" approach to worship to a generation of pragmatic, seeker-sensitive evangelicals.¹⁶ The alt.worship movement from Europe and Great Britain, which emphasized innovative, multi-sensory, techno-driven approaches to worship,¹⁷ was also influential. Dan Kimball, pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California, with his 2003 book *The Emerging Church*, and its follow-up, *Emerging Worship*,

category "Revisionists," however because of the negative and dismissive connotations implied by this term, I have personally changed this designation to "Re-Envisionists".

¹⁵ See, for instance, David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁶ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

¹⁷ Jonny Baker, Doug Gay, and Jenny Brown, *Alternative Worship: Resources from and for the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003).

became the chief adapter of this approach on this side of the pond and the quintessential representative of this new “relevant” approach to worship.¹⁸

It should be noted that this Relevant stream of the emerging conversation has the most continuity with previous forms of evangelical pragmatic approaches, and especially the seeker-sensitive/church growth movement of the 1980s and 90s. Just as the seeker-friendly churches were willing to adapt their worship styles, aesthetic environments, and even the content of their preaching to help middle-aged, suburban, and largely unchurched or de-churched baby-boomers feel comfortable again in an institutional church setting, so the Relevant stream of emergents argued that the same principle should be applied to reaching younger and postmodern generations. The difference, however, was that many younger postmodern individuals no longer wanted a sanitized version of Christian worship that had been stripped of all its unique symbols and inherent strangeness. Instead, postmoderns wanted to reconnect with mystery and ritual and something deeper and older and more rooted than themselves, and yet also wanted worship that is participatory and authentic and about more than simply going through the motions. Thus in these sorts of emerging churches it is not uncommon to find reinterpreted versions of traditional liturgies, jazz vespers services, or an eclectic mash-up of contemporary praise songs, 8th century hymns, *lectio divina*, and 16th century liturgies, usually with some kind of abstract visuals up on the projection screen the whole way through. When asked if they are “traditional” or “contemporary,” “liturgical” or “charismatic,” many of these emerging churches will simply answer “yes, all of the above.” On an individual level it is not uncommon to find Relevants experimenting with spiritual practices like fixed-hour prayer, fasting, the Ignatian examen, silence and solitude, contemplative and centering prayer, or meditation, among other ancient

¹⁸Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), and *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

disciplines.¹⁹ The overriding value for Relevants in all of this experimentation is a desire to cultivate diversity in the ways that we can experience and worship God, and, even more importantly, a passion for evangelism and willingness to do whatever it takes to reach postmodern people for Jesus. This holds true even when it requires changing or reinterpreting old-habits and staid traditions (or re-appropriating even older traditions and reinvesting them with new life and new meaning) in order to more effectively connect with the unchurched.

Three Streams: Reconstructionists

Another stream, which some call "Reconstructionists," has been more concerned with the structures and methods of church as a whole, beyond what is simply done in worship. This stream frequently focuses on the problems with big, institutional mega-churches and how they can become all about the show and the systems without encouraging authentic Christian community or spiritual transformation among its members.²⁰ Within older and more traditional church structures, however, there has likewise been a similar pushback against what are perceived as Spirit-quenching bureaucratic systems (on both the large and small scales) that seem (to Reconstructionists at least) more interested in maintaining dying institutions than in really being the community of Christ or living into his mission in the world. The reaction to these brands of both contemporary and traditional Christianity has led many to look for smaller and more intimate and intentional expressions of Christian community: house churches, organic or simple churches, small groups within larger bodies, as well as neo-monastic groups and other

¹⁹ A huge amount of literature has been put out in recent years about these sorts of spiritual practices, by both emergent authors and many others. See, for instance, Tony Jones' *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), Brian McLaren's *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), Phyllis Tickle's *The Divine Hours* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), and even *Flirting with Monasticism: Finding God on Ancient Paths* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006) by one of the co-founders of Presbymergent, Karen Sloan.

²⁰ See, for instance, Dave Fitch's *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

incarnational/intentional communities among the poor. Reconstructionists have rejected the hierarchical and business-like models of church structure and leadership that have dominated both contemporary mega-churches and the older, more traditional churches, in favor of more collaborative, horizontal models. The primary focus of Reconstructionists is not just on “doing church,” but on reimagining new ways of *being* the church. Some can be very anti-institutional, and tend to reject entirely the very idea of paid clergy, buildings, ministry programs, and the like²¹ - though of course there are varying degrees and not all Reconstructionists go to that extreme. Spencer Burke, founder of theOoze.com, one of the oldest and most heavily trafficked emerging Christianity websites, is one particularly influential Reconstructionist, who sees value in various forms of church while still encouraging and affirming the rapidly growing segment of Christians who are experimenting with new approaches.²² Pollster George Barna's 2005 book, *Revolution*, also focuses heavily on this trend, estimating that there may be as many as 20 million Christians in America experimenting with these new forms of church.²³

One recently popular subset of the Reconstructionist stream has been the discussion of missional vs. attractional churches. Led by Australian authors Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch,²⁴ as well as a host of other leaders and thinkers in the United States, this conversation emphasizes the need to create outward focused church communities whose purpose is to send people out into the world to bless the world, rather than simply trying to attract people into the institution of the church. For these emergents all other aspects of church structure and ministry are subordinated to the call to mission. For missional emergents, the church doesn't just have a mission, the church

²¹ See, for instance, Frank Viola & George Barna's *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, IL: BarnaBooks, 2008), as well as Pete Ward's *Liquid Church*.

²² Spencer Burke, *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations about God, Community, and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 19-20.

²³ George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: BarnaBooks, 2005), 13.

²⁴ See, for instance, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

is a mission – a fact which relativizes (though does not necessarily diminish the importance of) all other aspects of ministry and empowers radical innovation in both forms and methods. While the specifics of what “the mission” is may vary depending on the orientation of the church towards evangelism, social justice, or both, the common thread is that Reconstructionists believe the form of the church should be flexible in relation to the function of the church.

Three Streams: Re-Envisionists

The third stream, what I have termed the “Re-Envisionists,” shares a great deal of overlap with the missional church conversation, but is more interested in developing this missional mindset in explicitly theological directions. Some of the most influential Re-Envisionists can be found among the network of friendships that comprise Emergent Village, “a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”²⁵ Of these, author and speaker Brian McLaren is by far the most well-known, though there are many others, including practitioner/authors like Doug Pagitt, Danielle Shroyer, Nadia Bolz-Webber, and Peter Rollins, as well as theologians and scholars like Philip Clayton, John Franke, and Ruth Padilla DeBorst, among others.²⁶ While there is great diversity in both their starting points and trajectories, they share in common a willingness to re-envision the Christian faith and their received theological and interpretive traditions. This stream focuses on theological dialogue, which means that it naturally has much overlap with the first two streams (inasmuch as worship styles and church structures are themselves theological issues). There is an openness to

²⁵ Emergent Village, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/> (accessed April 1, 2010).

²⁶ It should also be noted that emergents are reading and have been greatly influenced by a wide range of scholars and practitioners who may or may not personally identify with emerging Christianity. Some of the most significant of these include New Perspective biblical scholars like NT Wright and Scot McKnight, mainstream European theologians like Jurgen Moltmann and Miroslav Volf, neo-Anabaptists like Stanley Hauerwas, evangelical Open Theists like Greg Boyd and Roger Olson, Latin American theologians like C. Rene Padilla, and Samuel Escobar, liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Harvey Cox, social activists like Jim Wallis, John Perkins, and Tom & Christine Sine, church leaders like Rob Bell and Erwin McManus, and postmodern philosophers like John Caputo and Nancey Murphy.

diverse viewpoints, and a willingness to question traditional assumptions, whether evangelical or liberal, leading to the independent development (though increasing convergence) of both post-conservative²⁷ and post-liberal²⁸ theologies. And while many (though not all) Re-Envisionists would agree that no aspect of our faith should be off-limits for re-examination and re-imagining, there is still, by-and-large, a deep commitment to the historic Christian faith as expressed in the early ecumenical creeds and the historical tradition (though there is also an equal interest in hearing from the more marginalized voices of Christian history as well, whether those of the ancient oriental traditions, the Anabaptists, or indigenous non-Western peoples, among others). Most Re-Envisionists would agree with Brian McLaren when he says

Yes, we have a past, to be sure, to which we must show proper honor and with which we must maintain proper continuity. That past should always have a vote, as G.K. Chesterton famously said when he defined tradition as the “democracy of the dead.” But I would add that the dead should not be given excessive veto power. As part of our inheritance to the past, we have been entrusted with an ongoing mission, and that mission requires us to be

²⁷ Post-conservatives are theologians within the evangelical traditions who seek to reformulate Christian faith away from its rationalistic and foundationalist assumptions, while preserving some key evangelical commitments. It is essentially an attempt to do evangelical theology through a postmodern lens. Theologians like Greg Boyd, William Dyrness, John Franke, Stanley Grenz, Scot McKnight, Nancey Murphy, Roger Olson, and F. LeRon Shults, have been pioneers of this new approach and their work provides much of the theological inspiration for those who are emerging from an evangelical background. For a good overview of this movement see Roger Olson’s *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

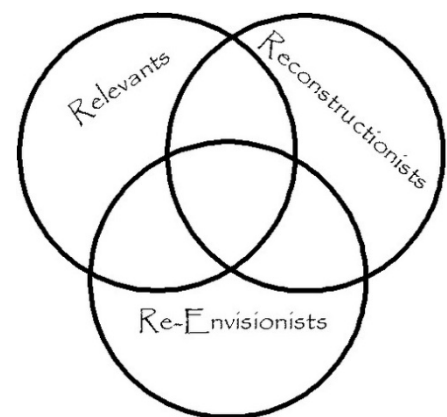
²⁸ Similar to post-conservative theology, post-liberals are those within mainline liberal traditions who are questioning both Enlightenment rationalism and the assumptions of classic liberal theology about the universality of religious experience. Also known as “narrative theology,” key post-liberal thinkers have included Brevard Childs, Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas, George Lindbeck, and Kathryn Tanner among others. For more see James M. Gustafson’s article “Just What Is ‘Postliberal Theology’?” (*The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999: 353-355) and Gary Dorrien’s “The Future of Postliberal Theology” (*The Christian Century*, July 18-25, 2001: 22-29).

loyal – yes, to beloved tradition – but no less to the beloved present world in which we serve.²⁹

In other words, just as the Reconstructionists are willing to relativize all forms and structures of the church to the mission of the church, so Re-Envisionists are willing to relativize their received traditions and theologies to this same mission. Whether it is evangelical doctrines of personal salvation and biblical inerrancy, or liberal quests to demythologize the Bible and find the historical Jesus, many emergents are finding a new center and fresh conversation around the present and coming reality of the Kingdom of God and the church’s mission in relation to it.

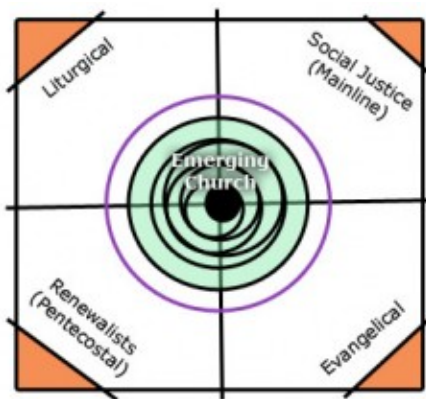
Because of this focus on mission and the Kingdom of God, Re-Envisionists also tend to be passionate about social justice and political activism, and typically share a corresponding disdain for the politics of the Religious Right. Among evangelical and post-evangelical emergents this has meant a re-discovery of a more integral view of the gospel which includes both personal and social redemption. This has found practical expression through a new-found passion for causes surrounding environmental caretaking, fair trade, poverty reduction, peacemaking, and human trafficking. This passion for social justice has also led to new partnerships between progressive evangelicals and more socially oriented mainline Christians who have welcomed a fresh infusion of energy behind their historic social concerns.

While often discrete, as illustrated by the graphic to the right, these three streams of emerging Christianity do overlap, and most emergents would likely locate themselves in more than one of these circles. Indeed, one of the major



²⁹ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 258.

impulses of emerging Christianity is to move beyond such clear-cut and exclusive categories and begin to engage in a much broader conversation. In this regard, as Phyllis Tickle has pointed out, the emerging church could also be called the *converging* church, inasmuch as it tends to embrace and recombine the many diverse traditions of Christianity in new ways. Thus, for instance, just as many emergents are interested in exploring new theologies, new liturgies, and new forms of church, even with more established traditions it is not uncommon to find charismatic Anglicans, Baptist Taize services, evangelicals for social justice, and Presbyterians holding jazz vesper services. As Tickle puts it, and as her diagram below illustrates, a new center is forming as Christians move beyond their former divisions to embrace more diverse expressions of the



faith.³⁰ The sub-title of Brian McLaren’s highly influential 2004 book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, captures this convergent spirit perfectly: “Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, anabaptist/Anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.”³¹

What then ties together such a diverse and variable movement as emerging Christianity? Among those who would self-identify as emergent (though not necessarily by all of those who exhibit emergent tendencies in their faith but do not personally own that designation), the unifying theme has been conversation. By this I mean the relational aspect of this movement. Emergents are bound together, despite (and often in celebration of) their differences, by a simple commitment to be in relationship with one another. The emerging conversation aspires to be

³⁰ Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 123-144.

³¹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

a *safe space*, a place to ask questions, explore new theologies, try new practices, and pursue God in both new and ancient ways without fear of condemnation or exclusion. The only requirement is that one has to be willing to extend this same safety and respect to others. As Tony Jones puts it, the answer to the question of what emergents hold in common is simply, “We’re friends.”³²

Is the Mainline Emerging?

The Decline of the Mainline

Within this amorphous network of friends and conversation partners, is there room for a emerging mainliners as well, and if so, what would this look like? This question is complicated by the statistical reality of decline within the mainline denominations and the various interpretations that this decline has been given by observers. The Presbyterian Church (USA), for instance, experienced a net loss of almost 1 million members in the 25 years since it came into being as a denomination through the 1983 merger of the northern United Presbyterian Church in the USA and the southern Presbyterian Church in the United States, and the pace of decline only seems to be accelerating. The six greatest percentage declines (and five of the six largest numerical declines) took place from 2003 to 2008.³³ Other mainline denominations have fared little better. According to the National Council of Churches’ 2010 *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, virtually every mainline denomination has reported continuing decline over the past several years (or even decades).³⁴ Given this grim reality, it may seem counterintuitive to describe centuries old denominations that now appear to be slowly dying as somehow also part of what is newly emerging in Christianity.

³² Jones, *The New Christians*, 23. Jones also goes on to speak of the emergent movement as being surrounded by an “envelope of friendship,” basing this on a theology of Christ’s act of reconciliation at the cross. (78-79)

³³ Jack Marcum, “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at 25: A Statistical Look at Denominational Change,” Research Services Presbyterian Church (USA), 2009, <http://www.pcusa.org/research/compstats/cs2008/IntroEssay.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2010).

³⁴ Philip E. Jenks, “Catholics, Mormons, Assemblies of God growing; Mainline churches report a continuing decline,” National Council of Churches News Service, February 12, 2010, <http://www.nccusa.org/news/100204yearbook2010.html> (accessed April 1, 2010).

Of course the reasons cited for this decline are numerous. The most common theory was articulated as far back as 1972 when sociologist Dean Kelley wrote about mainline decline in his book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*.³⁵ In it he argues that mainline churches were declining because they didn't demand enough from their members (and that, conversely, conservative and sectarian churches were growing because they did). Building on this theory, conservative observers such as evangelical historian Mark Noll have suggested that the mainline has declined because they became "wary of sharply defined doctrine or carefully circumscribed practice" because they "internalized the pluralism that was growing in American public life," thereby creating an identity crisis within their ranks. He also points to their "willingness to embrace ideas and trends as defined by the nation's media and educational elites," thereby alienating themselves from vast majority of ordinary Americans, and causing themselves to be perceived as "selling out to the world."³⁶

Mainline commentators themselves however offer a different spin on Kelley's thesis. Diana Butler Bass, for instance, suggests that while Kelley may be correct that "demanding" churches grow, he was incorrect in simply equating "demanding" with "conservative" and failed to see that spiritual intentionality and rigorous commitment could be cultivated on the liberal side of the church as well.³⁷ In a similar vein, theologian John Cobb suggests that the problem is a lack of strong, shared Christian commitments among mainline church members, and that this is primarily a result of their abdication of the theological task to the academy. For mainline

³⁵ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York, Harper & Row, 1977).

³⁶ Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 468-469.

³⁷ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 89.

churches to regain their vitality, he argues, it is not necessary for them to turn to conservative theology, but simply to begin doing theology on the local church level again in the first place.³⁸

Others point less to theological and more to sociological factors influencing mainline decline, including the rising affluence and education levels of white Americans in the decades following World War II,³⁹ and to a simple failure to adapt to the consumeristic demands of the modern church-goer. As Michael Jinkins summarizes (without endorsing) this theory, “If the church is declining in membership it must be because it is not giving the customer what it wants; nobody’s buying what the church is selling.”⁴⁰ Jinkins also argues that the preoccupation of the mainline denominations with their own decline, along with their desperate attempts to reverse it, may, ironically, be one of the contributing factors to it. As he says, “Few people are attracted to a group whose recruiting efforts have the same emotional tone as that of a clinging, needy lover.”⁴¹

Emergent Perspectives on the Mainline

Some emergent critics also point to the institutionalism and massive layers of bureaucracy that have come to typify many aspects of mainline denominations as one of the key problems contributing to their decline. Such systems, they argue, squelch needed reform, replace common sense with rules and regulations, discourage young and innovative leaders, and can even, in some instances, become abusive.⁴² Tony Jones, for instance, has said that contemporary denominations are a “system that has outgrown its usefulness, and I am calling those who run

³⁸ Cobb, 2-5.

³⁹ Floyd L. Berrier, “A New Context for Doing United Methodist Theology” (dissertation, Columbia Theological Seminary, 1990).

⁴⁰ Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Postmodern Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.

⁴¹ Ibid, 11.

⁴² See for instance Tony Jones’ blog series about the ordination controversy surrounding Presbytermergent leader Adam Walker Cleaveland, which can be found at <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/05/lets-ordain-adam/>, <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/05/reconsider-ordination-now/>, <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/05/reconsider-ordination-now-continued/>, <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/05/my-anti-ordination-sermon/>, <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/05/ordination-housekeeping/>.

that system to reform it, radically and immediately.”⁴³ Similarly at the recent *Theology After Google* conference in Claremont, Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon’s Porch, an emerging church in Minneapolis (where Tony Jones is listed as “theologian-in-residence”), and founder of the network that eventually became Emergent Village, opined that “things like denomination and ordination are part of the old system of control and domination that has to go.”⁴⁴ Other emergents, especially those of a more radically Reconstructionist bent, go even further, decrying not just denominations but any form of institutional Christianity altogether, and most especially church buildings and paid staff, calling for a return to the simple house-churches of the first-century.⁴⁵

Not all emergents go quite so far, however. While many have honest critiques of the flaws of denominationalism, and though some would describe themselves as post-denominational, few reject the institutions of traditional denominations altogether. Indeed, one of the four values of Emergent Village is a “Commitment to the Church in all its forms.” Part of this statement reads:

We practice “deep ecclesiology” – rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others, we see that every form of the church has both weaknesses and strengths, both liabilities and potential... We affirm both the value of strengthening, renewing, and transitioning existing churches and organizations, and the need for planting, resourcing, and coaching new ones of many kinds.⁴⁶

⁴³ Jones, “Reconsider Ordination. Now. (Continued),” Tony Jones blog, entry posted May 12, 2009, <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/05/reconsider-ordination-now-continued/> (accessed April 1, 2010).

⁴⁴ Mitchell Landsberg, “‘Theology After Google’ conference takes look at religion in the Web era,” *LA Times*, March 15, 2010, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-beliefs15-2010mar15,0,4976077.story> (accessed April 1, 2010).

⁴⁵ Again, one of the most explicit examples of this is Viola and Barna’s, *Pagan Christianity?*

⁴⁶ Emergent Village, “Values & Practices,” Emergent Village, <http://emergentvillage.com/about-information/values-and-practices> (accessed April 1, 2010).

Likewise, in a recent interview for Duke Divinity's Faith & Leadership website, Brian McLaren highlighted a number of valuable functions that denominations do well while at the same time offering constructive advice as to how denominations can address their current challenges.⁴⁷ He affirms that while institutions are essential and important, he points out that an institutionalism where denominations lose their sense of external mission and purpose and simply operate in a "regime continuation" mode is the real danger, and suggests that the increasing marginalization of denominations in American society is actually an opportunity for the church to rediscover itself as a movement as well as an institution.

Note that McLaren does not frame his statement as an either/or proposition. For him, as for many other emergents, movement and structure can coexist, and existing institutions need to therefore be reformed but not wholly rejected. Rather than being anti-denominational, these emergents could be better described as post-denominational in the sense that they want to move beyond rigid institutionalism to more flexible and responsive structures that can move into the future without simply rejecting all that has gone before or losing the treasures of the past. These post-denominationalists recognize the fact that for the vast majority of both church and un-church Americans, denominational identities are simply irrelevant. Willing to adapt themselves and their churches to this new situation, post-denominationalists still feel a loyalty to the traditions and institutions that have nurtured them and do not feel called to simply move beyond them but instead to stay and work for change from within.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, "Brian McLaren: Denominations do invaluable things," Faith & Leadership, <http://www.faithandleadership.duke.edu/multimedia/brian-d-mclaren-denominations-do-invaluable-things> (accessed April 1, 2010).

⁴⁸ See for instance Adam Walker Cleveland's post "Denominational Loyalty in a Post-denominational World," Pomomusings, entry posted June 19, 2009, <http://pomomusings.com/2009/06/19/post-denominational/> (accessed April 1, 2010).

Anglican church planting strategist Bob Hopkins describes these kind people as “loyal radicals.” He suggests that they share three basic characteristics: first, a love for their church combined with a passion for change; second, an extraordinary gift of faith that God is able to bring out the desired transformations despite the numerous institutional hurdles that get thrown in the way; third, an attitude, a strategy, and the patience to look for creative ways to produce the kind of change they wish to see, despite the challenges. Utilizing these qualities, loyal radicals work for “benevolent subversion” within their chosen denominations.⁴⁹ This designation of “loyal radicals” has since been taken up by co-founder of Presbymergent, Adam Walker Cleaveland, and other emergents within the mainline churches as an accurate description of their own relation to their denominational contexts.⁵⁰

Practicing/Intentional Congregations

Diana Butler Bass has identified the communities these sorts of individuals create within the mainline denominations as “Practicing Congregations.” She describes their key characteristic as that of intentionality:

Intentional congregations are marked by mobility, choice, risk, reflexivity, and reflection. They think about what they do and why they do it in relations to their own history, their cultural context, the larger Christian story found in scripture and liturgy, and in line with the longer traditions of the Christian faith. In addition... they reflexively engage practices that best foster their sense of identity and mission.⁵¹

In Bass’s terminology, intentional congregations that originate from the conservative end of the theological spectrum are “Emergent” while those that originate from the liberal side are

⁴⁹ Bob Hopkins, “Loyal Radicals,” Anglican Church Planting Initiatives, <http://www.acpi.org.uk/stories/10%20Loyal%20Radicals.htm> (accessed April 2, 2010).

⁵⁰ Adam Walker Cleaveland, “Presbymergent: The Story of One Mainliner’s Quest to Be a Loyal Radical,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 119-127.

⁵¹ Bass, 80.

“Practicing.” She suggests that both of these expressions of post-conservative and post-liberal Christianity are in fact converging and coming towards one another. In her words, “intentionality trumps the old theological divide,” as both Emergent and Practicing congregations attempt to practice Christian tradition as a way of life.⁵² In fact, I would argue that the old differences are so irrelevant to this new movement that there really is no need for two separate terms. I think Bass might agree that her “Practicing Congregations” are simply one example within my broader category of emerging Christianity (or rather, that what I am calling “emerging Christianity” is essentially the same as her broader category of “intentional congregations”). Either way, I want to suggest that Practicing Congregations are examples of what the kind of emergence I have been describing looks like in a mainline context. As with the three streams of emergence I outlined above, these are churches engaged in rethinking worship practices and spiritual disciplines, church structures, as well as their theologies and conception of mission in light of their particular postmodern contexts. In Bass’s words, these are churches that “experience new vibrancy through a reappropriation of historic Christian practices and a sustained communal engagement with Christian narrative.” They are “communities that choose to rework denominational tradition in light of local experience to create a web of practices that transmit identity, nurture community, cultivate mature spirituality, and advance mission.”⁵³

Bass describes this process of intentional reappropriation of historically grounded Christian practices as “retraditioning.” This is a process that becomes necessary after a period of detraditionalization, whereby postmodern cultural and sociological factors caused received traditions to “no longer provide meaning and authority in everyday life.”⁵⁴ Paradoxically, this very condition creates the possibility for a return to past traditions, though with a greater sense of

⁵² Ibid, 85-87.

⁵³ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 28.

awareness, intentionality and choice, and with an emphasis on both continuity and change. As Bass puts it, this sort of fluid retraditioning “willingly innovates with forms (and changes its external appearances) while attempting to return (at some level) to a historic core of practices and beliefs.”⁵⁵

It is important to note that Bass’ description of practicing and retraditioning congregations is based not on her own personal prescriptions for how mainline churches *should* change, but rather on an in-depth study of how mainline churches *are* changing and have *already* changed.⁵⁶ In other words, she is arguing that these practicing, emerging congregations already exist within the mainline, and that they are capable of bringing new life and vitality to their denominations even within the midst of overall numerical decline. Through a three-year study of fifty mainline churches that exhibit this kind of intentionality and renewal, Bass provides strong evidence that emergence and mainline denominations can, in fact, go together.

Historically speaking, Bass places these types of intentional/emerging congregations within a new phase of American church history that began roughly two decades ago. Adapting historian E. Brooks Holifield’s periodization of congregational history in America from 1607 to the present, she argues that the previous phase, labeled by Holifield as “participatory congregations” and marked as starting around 1950, which was typified by targeted programs to reach niche audiences of suburban Americans heavily influenced by consumerism, is now giving way to new forms of church that no longer fit this model. These new forms, her “intentional congregations,” share the same “sense of dynamism, movement, fluidity, and flexibility in structure, leadership, shared ministry, and worship” as participatory congregations – and in this regard “new paradigm” seeker-oriented and “purpose driven” type churches can be seen as a

⁵⁵ Ibid, 43.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 3.

kind of transitional form according to Bass – and yet they differ by resisting the consumer marketing strategies as well as the technique-oriented, program-driven, and therapeutic forms common to that model. Instead, they are more interested in spiritual authenticity and faith as a communal way of life, emphasizing creativity, theology and mysticism over organization and programs. In Bass’s terms then, practicing congregations are simply a distinctively Protestant mainline form of this broader trend.⁵⁷

Hyphenated Emergents

Most of the congregations Bass describes in her book *The Practicing Congregation*, as well as in two follow-up works based on this same study,⁵⁸ do not seem to be self-consciously aware that they have been participating in these new trends within American Christianity. However, there are a handful of congregations and church leaders within the mainline denominations that are more explicitly “emergent.” Networks like Presbymergent, Anglimergent, Luthermergent, and others came into being as practitioners in these denominations became aware of the same sorts of trends Bass was seeing and began purposefully to seek out others who were noticing them as well.⁵⁹ These hybrid –mergent groups share the characteristics of Bass’s practicing congregations, but they do so with a greater degree of self-awareness. Because of this, they are also more likely to push the boundaries of the retraditioning process, sometimes creatively reinterpreting the received tradition in startling new ways while at other times rejecting aspects of it entirely in favor of newer (or simply different) and more relevant expressions of faith. Hybrid -mergents also tend to be more closely connected to other emergent

⁵⁷ Ibid, 15-19.

⁵⁸ Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Stewart-Sicking, eds., *From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006); and Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

⁵⁹ For a list of the hybrid-mergent groups operative as of Spring of 2008 see the following blog post by Tony Jones and Steve Knight: “Emergent Hybrid Synergy: The Rise of the –Mergents,” Emergent Village, entry posted March 28, 2008, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/emergent-hybrid-synergy-the-rise-of-the-mergents> (accessed April 2, 2010).

Christians outside of their own denominations, which allows for a greater degree of cross-pollination among traditions, though perhaps at the risk of losing some of the valuable distinctiveness of each.

According to Phyllis Tickle's interpretation, there are actually several different layers of emergence within most traditions, with varying levels of remaining commitment to the received tradition in relation to their acceptance of emergence. Of these, the hybrid -mergents are the most thoroughly "emergent" while still maintaining some connection to their historic institutions. Tickle places Bass's "Re-traditioning" churches farther out from the emergent core, defining them as "those who have chosen to stay with their inherited church, but at the same time energetically wish to make it more fully what it once was," in contrast to a middle ring of "Progressives" who are more willing to wrestle with and adapt outmoded dogmas and structures to new postmodern realities, as well as to the inner-ring of "Hyphenateds" who are far more willing to raze everything to the ground and rebuild anew, though still on the same ground and with many of the same, salvaged materials.⁶⁰ According to Tickle, hyphenated emergents live in a kind of schizophrenic and yet creative tension between their existing institutions and their pull towards full emergence, and may ultimately need to make a decision one way or the other.⁶¹

For the time being however, hyphenated groups are the most obviously "emergent" expressions of emerging Christianity still within the mainline denominations, and a clear example of Bob Hopkins' "loyal radicals." We thus now turn to look more closely at one particular group of hyphenateds, the Presbymergents, in order to discover how, exactly, such groups tend to be both radical and yet ultimately loyal to their inherited traditions.

⁶⁰ Tickle, 141-143.

⁶¹ Though at least one hyphenated Presbymergent, Carol Howard Merritt, disagrees with Tickle's prediction, saying in a blog review of Tickle's book that she herself is "postmodern Presbyterian" who nevertheless feels no compulsion to decide once and for all where she ultimately belongs. Carol Howard Merritt, "Great Emergence," Tribal Church.org, entry posted October 2, 2008, <http://tribalchurch.org/?p=879> (accessed April 2, 2010).

Presbymergent

History

Presbymergent had its formal beginnings at the Mainline Emergent/s conference at Columbia Theological Seminary just outside of Atlanta, Georgia in January/February of 2007.⁶² Adam Walker Cleaveland, a PC(USA) seminary student at Princeton who was also working on a chapter entitled “Presbymergent” for *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* published later that year, and Karen Sloan, a minister in the PC(USA) with an MDiv from Fuller Theological Seminary, were asked to lead a seminar on “Practice & Presbyterianism: Emergence as Reformation.”⁶³ In their preparations prior to the event they came up with the idea of starting up a website called Presbymergent⁶⁴ to foster conversation among the many people who were asking questions related to Presbyterianism and the emerging church. Interest in the site grew rapidly, even before the conference began,⁶⁵ and over 80 people attended the seminar that first weekend.

From that beginning, the Presbymergent community grew through a combination of online interactions, both through the website as well as social-networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, and, even more significantly, through face-to-face interactions at the “Presbymergent Parties” hosted at various Presbyterian events around the nation. This growth was greatly facilitated by the freedom Karen Sloan had during that year to travel while she was between ministry calls, in her words, "contributing to a network of friends, finding and

⁶² Troy Bronsink, a PC(USA) minister and coordinator of the Atlanta Emergent Cohort who helped to organize the conference described it as “designed to reorient the “mainline” discussion about “emergent styles of worship or outreach” back towards Emergent’s deeper discourse about such things as systems theory, orthopraxis, new monasticism, orthoparadoxy, local theology, relationally, missional church, creative innovation, post-colonialism... you name it.” Troy Bronsink, “Mainline Emergent/s Update from Troy Bronsink,” Emergent Village, entry posted November 20, 2006, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/mainline-emergents-update-from-troy-bronsink> (accessed April 2, 2010).

⁶³ Much of this history, unless indicated otherwise, comes directly from first-hand interviews with both Adam Walker Cleaveland and Karen Sloan.

⁶⁴ <http://presbymergent.org/>

⁶⁵ For instance see the statistics from four-days after the site was launched at “Presbymergent Stats and Mainline Emergent/s Bloggers,” Presbymergent, entry posted January 30, 2007, <http://presbymergent.org/2007/01/30/presbymergent-stats-and-mainline-emergents-bloggers/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

connecting those seeking to be a part of reformed, missional communities located in postmodern contexts." She credits the conversations she was able to have with drawing many people into the conversation that might not have otherwise realized they themselves were in fact emergent. As she discovered, the interest in this conversation among Presbyterians extended far beyond the small group of self-conscious "emergents" and included a diverse range of age groups. By mid-March the Presbymergent website had over 100 members,⁶⁶ and this number itself had doubled by the following Fall.⁶⁷ Enough momentum was gained in such a short amount of time that by October 2007 Presbymergent was able to hold its own dedicated conference at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, attended by about 60 Presbyterians from all over the country.⁶⁸ To facilitate the ongoing development of Presbymergent a Coordinating Group of 36 was selected in May of 2008.

The culmination of this early growth period came at the Presbyterian General Assembly in June of 2008, where many Presbymergents gathered together for the first time in one place, hosted several special events, and staffed a booth through which they were able to spread the word more widely and network with a significant number of people interested in connecting with the Presbymergent community. Also at this GA one of their original members, Bruce Reyes-Chow of Mission Bay Community Church in San Francisco, was elected Moderator for the entire denomination. Reyes-Chow identifies himself as part of "emergence" (a broad term, analogous

⁶⁶ "103 Users," Presbymergent, entry posted March 14, 2007, <http://presbymergent.org/2007/03/14/103-users/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

⁶⁷ "200 Registered Contributors," Presbymergent, entry posted November 20, 2007, <http://presbymergent.org/2007/11/29/200-registered-contributors/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

⁶⁸ Short summaries of the event by Adam Walker Cleaveland can be found at "Presbymergent Conference," Pomomusings, entry posted October 22, 2007, <http://pomomusings.com/2007/10/22/presbymergent-conference/> (accessed April 2, 2010) and at "The First Official 100% Presbymergent Conference," Presbymergent, entry posted October 13, 2007, <http://presbymergent.org/2007/10/13/the-first-official-100-presbymergent-conference/> (accessed April 2, 2010), and a summary in the Presbyterian Outlook by Chris Brown can be found at "Presbymergent Conference sees momentum, hope," The Presbyterian Outlook, November 12, 2007, <http://pres-outlook.net/news-and-analysis/1-news-a-analysis/6286.html> (accessed April 2, 2010).

to my “emerging Christianity,” popularized by Phyllis Tickle’s “Great Emergence”), which for him, in part, means “a consistent and exhibited life of shared authority, communal theologizing and institutional fluidity.”⁶⁹ Sloan suggests that Reyes-Chow’s election was a sign of just how large of a presence and impact emergents have within the PC(USA).⁷⁰ Some, however, see his term as somewhat of a missed opportunity to gain even larger institutional support for the work of Presbymergent,⁷¹ while others consider the whole quest for institutional acceptance to be somewhat quixotic given that emergence in general seeks to reform and change existing systems, not to be simply absorbed into them.⁷²

Nonetheless, Presbymergents built on this momentum as the Coordinating Group met in Louisville, Kentucky for several days in February 2009 to create some structure and short term goals for their community. At this gathering they developed five working groups to further the overarching goal of Presbymergent to be a hub for emerging conversation in the PC(USA). As described on the Presbymergent website these groups included:

- 1) National/Regional Cohorts through which the Presbymergent conversation seeks to move into face-to-face small group gatherings across the denominational landscape.
- 2) Creative Guilds that seek to offer space to creatively work with Liturgy that moves and shapes and speaks to this emerging vision of Presbymergent.
- 3) eVokation, a movable event that seeks to awaken “the sleeping creative geniuses” in our midst and live into the call to be the church.

⁶⁹ Bruce Reyes-Chow, “I am emergence,” Bruce Reyes-Chow blog, entry posted February 11, 2010, <http://www.reyes-chow.com/2010/02/i-am-emergence.html> (accessed April 2, 2010).

⁷⁰ Karen Sloan, phone interview by author, March 18, 2010.

⁷¹ John Franke, phone interview by author, March 8, 2010.

⁷² Troy Bronsink, Skype interview by author, March 10, 2010.

4) New Church Development identification/support/fundraising that seeks to develop relationships, resources, and faith communities that waif the scent of Presbymergent as we walk along side each other in witnessing to the life present in the PC(USA).

5) Organ(ic)izing Group, which is responsible for forming the new Coordinating Group and working to formally organize Presbymergent into a non-profit group.⁷³

Led by Ryan Kemp-Pappan, this fifth Organ(ic)izing Group in particular was charged with keeping Presbymergent “both organic and organized,” which can be seen, perhaps as a fusion of both emergent (organic) and Presbyterian (organized – i.e. “decently and in order”) sensibilities.

Since this meeting, however, Presbymergent seems to have lost much of its forward momentum. New posts on the website slowed to a trickle in the year following this gathering, and there is little evidence that any of these five working groups have made any progress towards their explicit goals. While the websites, connections, and structure are all still in place, Presbymergent as an active community seems to be in a dormant phase. The key reason for this seems to be a lack of active leadership. In diffuse networks where many individuals or teams of individuals are tasked with achieving a diverse set of goals, there can sometimes be a tendency for no one in particular to actually do the work, each person assuming that someone else on their team will take up the slack. This is especially the case in situations where most involved already have more primary commitments to other significant projects that demand much of their time and energy, as is the case with nearly everyone on the Presbymergent Coordinating group.

More specifically, several of the early core leaders have each dropped off their level of involvement over the past year. Karen Sloan, for instance, after her stint as a traveling Presbymergent networker, chose to direct her ministry towards a neo-monastic community in

⁷³ Ryan Kemp-Pappan, “Presbymergent CG now forming!,” Presbymergent, entry posted March 2, 2009, <http://presbymergent.org/2009/03/02/presbymergent-cg-now-forming/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

Pittsburgh once it became clear that Presbymergent was not interested in pursuing funding to keep her on full-time in her previous capacity.⁷⁴ That lack of a direct presence for Presbymergent at many regional Presbyterian events seems to have diminished their capacity for personal connections with new participants. Likewise, there was a great deal of ambiguity this past year over whether Adam Walker Cleaveland would remain affiliated with the PC(USA) after encountering a series of institutional hurdles in his ordination process.⁷⁵ While these difficulties were not directly related to his involvement with Presbymergent they did serve to make the future of the group uncertain since Adam has always been one of the strongest driving forces behind the Presbymergent community. While the issue was finally resolved this past January, with Adam choosing to remain within the denomination,⁷⁶ the long period of uncertainty did seem to dampen the momentum of Presbymergent. At the same time, and in a similar vein, Ryan Kemp-Pappan, another long-time participant and key organizational leader within Presbymergent, chose to change his denominational affiliation and joined the Disciples of Christ after his presbytery refused to ordain him. The leadership vacuum created by his absence, combined with the ambiguities surrounding Sloan and Walker Cleaveland, has clearly contributed to the lack of visible Presbymergent activity since the February '09 gathering.

From another perspective, however, one could argue that the influence of Presbymergent over this past year can be seen not in any centralized efforts, but rather in the spirit of emergence that has been manifested precisely in the various other projects that Presbymergent members

⁷⁴ Some of these details came from a phone interview with Karen Sloan herself (March 18, 2010), though some can also be read at Karen Sloan, "Intentional Community: A new kind of church planting," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 20, 2009, <http://pres-outlook.net/reports-a-resources/lent/8590-intentional-community-a-new-kind-of-church-planting.html> (accessed April 2, 2010)

⁷⁵ These difficulties can be read about at Walker Cleaveland, "Ordination Update," *Pomomusings*, entry posted March 4, 2009, <http://pomomusings.com/2009/03/04/ordination-update/> (accessed April 2, 2010) and Walker Cleaveland, "When an M.Div from Princeton isn't Enough..." *Pomomusings*, entry posted May 8, 2009, <http://pomomusings.com/2009/05/08/ordination-struggles/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

⁷⁶ Walker Cleaveland, "Ordination Update: Finally, A Decision," *Pomomusings*, entry posted January 26, 2010, <http://pomomusings.com/2010/01/26/ordination-decision/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

have been involved in. Carol Howard Merritt, a highly involved member of the Coordinating Group, for instance, has mentioned the *God Complex Radio* project she launched with Bruce Reyes-Chow and Landon Whitsitt (both are participants in Presbymergent), an “Unconference” she is organizing with Kemp-Pappan, as well as numerous New Church Developments and new emerging worship services that she and other Presbymergents have been instrumental in starting, as tangible “spin-offs” of the Presbymergent conversation.⁷⁷ In other words, this season of Presbymergent’s existence may be less about expanding the network of conversation partners or engaging in communal projects, and more about unleashing the influence of emergent ideas into organic and decentralized new directions. Indeed, one might argue that this approach is more in keeping with the values and spirit of emergence in the first place.

However, regardless of whether this current period of less overt activity is really a loss of energy or simply a diffusion of it into a wider range of activities, as a connectional network Presbymergent has continued to grow and still enjoys broad appeal within the denomination. For instance, according to statistics provided by Walker Cleaveland, as of March 2010 there were 272 contributors to the Presbymergent website, 743 followers of its Twitter account, and 1439 fans of its Facebook page. Whether its overall impact within the PC(USA) will have not just breadth, but depth and longevity as well, remains to be seen.

Beyond their connection to one another through various online media, however, what is it that ties Presbymergents together on a conceptual level? What is the Presbymergent ethos? If, as I have suggested, the diffusion of Presbymergent activities is in fact true to the spirit of emergence, what exactly is that “spirit” as it relates to Presbyterianism? The term that gets thrown out there most often by Presbymergent folk in regards to this question is the one I have

⁷⁷ Carol Howard Merritt, email interview by author, March 12, 2010.

already mentioned earlier, “loyal radicals.” What loyal radicalism entails in relation to Presbyterians in particular does require some unpacking, however.

Loyal

Presbyterians are true “hyphenateds” in that while they are indeed trying to engage with the challenges of postmodernity and want their church to emerge in new directions, they are nonetheless loyal to the denominational community that raised them, or that they eventually claimed as home. Of course, this loyalty is based in diverse reasons and not all Presbyterians agree on what they appreciate most about their inherited tradition.

One of the most often heard refrains heard among Presbyterians in regards to what they remain loyal to in their Presbyterian heritage is the Reformation cry of *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, the church reformed and always reforming.⁷⁸ Presbyterians typically see this as sanction for their desire to see their church emerge and adapt to ever changing contexts while still remaining rooted to a historical tradition larger than just the demands of the present moment. The fact that this phrase is part of this historical tradition, however, affirms that this desire to emerge and adapt and change is not in itself a betrayal of the tradition but a faithful response to it. The tradition itself already has an affirmation of change and growth built into it. As Walker Cleaveland notes, “there is plenty of room in Reformed theology to allow for an open and organic vision of church.”⁷⁹ Presbyterian theologian John Franke of Biblical Seminary points out that there are two ways to fall off the wagon of theological tradition within the Presbyterian/Reformed heritage: ossifying the tradition of being Reformed (which he identifies with the contemporary Neo-Calvinist movement⁸⁰), or else always reforming without connection

⁷⁸ Walker Cleaveland, *An Emerging Manifesto of Hope*, 123.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ For more on the Neo-Calvinists see David Van Biema’s article on “The New Calvinism” in Time Magazine, March 12, 2009, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html

to the tradition (perhaps the error of some extreme liberal elements within the church). For those in the Presbyterian tradition at its best, however, there is always healthy respect for the past combined with a constant awareness of and openness to the future, and Presbymergents seem to have strongly imbibed this ethos.⁸¹ Indeed, Presbymergent pastor Chris Erdman of University Presbyterian Church in Fresno, California argues that the new and provocative theological directions being explored by emergent leaders like Brian McLaren have a deep kinship with the project of Reformed theologian Karl Barth, which similarly demonstrated a freedom and diversity that was nonetheless rooted to tradition. As Erdman states “It is not a freedom from the tradition. Rather it is a freedom to live inside the tradition, but never simply to repeat it. Ours ought to be critical while being playful, wild without being reckless... and we must be willing to change our minds;” and he suggests that this is also what emerging Christianity is about.⁸²

Related to this “always reforming” ethic, many Presbymergents also cite the openness to diversity, both theological and in other kinds, built upon a communal commitment to one another that they find within the PC(USA), as a reason to remain loyal to their tradition. As Walker Cleaveland points out, change, for Presbyterians, does not come about solely through individuals but rather through communities guided by the Word and the Spirit as they work towards the kingdom of God in this world.⁸³ Similarly, Susan Phillips, a Presbymergent pastor from rural Wisconsin, cites the Reformed Tradition’s principle of “mutual forbearance”, which she defines as “trusting that G-d rules each one’s conscience and gives us the grace to disagree without disowning one another as sisters and brothers;” upholding this as something that emergents of all

(accessed April 5, 2010), or Collin Hansen’s *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

⁸¹ John Franke, phone interview by author, March 8, 2010.

⁸² Chris Erdman, “Digging up the Past: Karl Barth (the Reformed Giant) as Friend to the Emerging Church,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, 236-243.

⁸³ Walker Cleaveland, *An Emerging Manifesto of Hope*, 123.

traditions can wholeheartedly embrace and even learn from.⁸⁴ While emerging Christianity aspires to be a broad movement and a safe space for Christians of all types to ask questions and express multiple viewpoints without fear of exclusion (with varying degrees of success as more conservative leaning emergents have begun expressing concern with and distancing themselves from the ideas of more progressive emergents⁸⁵), there is perhaps much they can learn from the experience of Presbyterians who have already been trying this themselves within their own context.

Others find their loyalty to Presbyterianism based in part on the Reformed tradition's strong emphasis on theology and the life of the mind. As one young Presbytermergent lay-person put it to me, "I like order. I like study... I was told when I was little that Presbyterian churches dedicated more square footage to classrooms than to sanctuary space. This excited me. I like flannelgrams."⁸⁶ Similarly, Carol Howard Merritt described her relief, after experiences as a young adult in conservative evangelical church settings where, at times, she had had more theological training than the pastor, when finding a tradition that encouraged a formally trained clergy and celebrated intellectual and theological depth.⁸⁷ While both of these testimonies may seem to simply reflect personal preferences, it should be noted that this hunger for an intellectual (yet practical) faith is common to many participants in the broader emerging movement. Thus it is not surprising that some would find Presbyterianism to be an accommodating home, especially for those like Merritt who have not found such to be the case in their previous traditions. As John Franke noted in a recent interview, the Reformed tradition brings a wealth of philosophical and

⁸⁴ Susan Phillips, email interview by author, March 6, 2010.

⁸⁵ See for instance North Park professor Scot McKnight's highly critical review of Brian McLaren's latest book, "Review: Brian McLaren's 'A New Kind of Christianity'," Christianity Today, February 26, 2010, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=86862 (accessed April 5, 2010).

⁸⁶ Rebecca Cynamon-Murphy, email interview by author, March 6, 2010.

⁸⁷ Carol Howard Merritt, email interview by author, March 12, 2010.

theological resources to the emerging conversation. For instance, three of the greatest “hinge-points” in the history of theology in Franke’s estimation – John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Karl Barth – were all part of the Reformed tradition, and he suggests that emergents can benefit greatly from exposure to that tradition. On the other hand, Franke also notes that Reformed thinkers also sometimes fall into the trap of assuming that there is only one right way to think about theology, and thus they can also benefit from emergent’s openness to plurality.⁸⁸

A final, yet highly significant, point of loyalty for many Presbymergents is their deep appreciation for the relationships they have found within the PC(USA), and the role that community plays in their denomination – whether through local committees and potlucks, or the larger system of polity. As Walker Cleaveland notes, “It’s impossible to be a Presbyterian lone ranger.”⁸⁹ Presbymergents often do have significant critiques of the stultifying effects the polity and bureaucracy of a large and long-established denomination like the PC(USA) can have on fresh ideas, innovative ministries, and newly emergent expressions of the faith. However, there is also a deep appreciation among many for the system of accountability and oversight the Presbyterian polity also allows for, as well as the protection it can provide for both pastors and congregations from situations of abuse. This tension between freedom and accountability is a frequent refrain among Presbymergents (judging by the regularity with which it was mentioned in the blog posts I reviewed and interviews I conducted). As Bruce Reyes-Chow put it at the recent Emergence Now conference at Columbia Seminary, the challenge is how to

⁸⁸ John Franke, phone interview by author, March 8, 2010.

⁸⁹ Walker Cleaveland, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, 122.

“institutionalize fluidity” and exist in the midst of “something and moving, adapting, navigating.”⁹⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, this also seems to be a common theme for other hyphenated emergents who find themselves within other established denominations, as evidenced by the frequency such issues came up among the contributors to Becky Garrison’s *Rising from the Ashes*. In this short book she presents interviews on a variety of topics with over thirty influential emerging leaders from mainline denominations. Many of the contributors spoke both of their desire to create new forms of worship and new structures of church while at the same time continuing to exist within established denominational systems of accountability and institutional support.

Radicals

If there are many things that Presbyterians appreciate about their denominational tradition, there are at least as many ways that they would like to see their church change or grow. Indeed, it is precisely this openness to change and growth that broadly defines one as an emergent in the first place; and while the Reformed tradition may in principle be defined as *semper reformanda*, Presbyterians are particularly concerned to make this principle a reality in the actual practice of their denomination, something which is too often not the case. As Walker Cleaveland rightly observes, “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.”⁹¹ In light of that reality, Walker Cleaveland, and others like him, are “grateful for the space Emergent has

⁹⁰ Erin Dunigan, “You say ‘emergent’ and I say ‘emergence’,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 22, 2010, <http://www.pres-outlook.com/reports-a-resources/presbyterian-heritage-articles/9772.html> (accessed April 5, 2010).

⁹¹ Walker Cleaveland, 125.

given to those like me who have been desperate to find a safe place for this process,” especially the “unspoken understanding that it is acceptable to question, critique, and deconstruct much of what we think and believe.”⁹² In a postmodern context, younger generations especially are increasingly comfortable with a lack of certainty and a plurality of perspectives. Furthermore, as French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard observed, they also tend towards a deep-rooted incredulity toward meta-narratives – those large framing stories by which religious traditions, among others, try to order and control their world and those that are a part of it.⁹³ Thus this emergent openness to deconstruction (as well as creative reconstruction and re-formation) of existing systems can feel like a breath of fresh air and a reinvigoration of a stagnant faith. As Franke points out:

We can't just let tradition go, but there is a dialectical tension. We shouldn't let tradition constrain our imagination either. We engage with the past for the sake of the present and the future. Too often we use tradition in a homogenizing way, but the reality of the Christian and even the Presbyterian tradition is that it is incredibly diverse. Emergence can help us deconstruct our Presbyterian tradition for the sake of a deeper tradition.⁹⁴

Or as Troy Bronsink, a Presbymergent church planter from Atlanta, puts it, “I suggest we might view Emergent as a creative agent in the midst of the church readapting prior symbols...a guild of prophets, so to speak, placed inside the church to pursue curiosity, to take little risks instead of staying in writer’s block.”⁹⁵ According to him, the mission and contribution of groups like Presbymergent to the wider church is to “orient the symbols of theological discourse so that

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁹⁴ John Franke, phone interview by author, March 8, 2010.

⁹⁵ Troy Bronsink, “The Art of Emergence: Being God’s Handiwork,” *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, 69.

existing practitioners of Christianity (church leaders, professionals, theologians, and laity) can put these patterns to use.”⁹⁶

Here again Presbymergents return to the tension between faithfulness to the tradition, to the existing symbols of theological discourse, and freedom to expand and reorient these symbols in new ways, and it is in the midst of this tension that emerging Christianity can offer an even greater appropriation of plurality than is possible within the Reformed tradition alone. While rootedness in a particular tradition is a good thing, many emergents are hungry for the kind of convergence that Phyllis Tickle describes, where emphases from numerous differing traditions begin to collide and overlap. As we’ve seen, according to Tickle, emergents are those Christians who live most naturally in that place of convergence, and hyphenateds like Presbymergents are those who are trying to keep a foot in both worlds, both rooted in a particular tradition, and yet open to sampling and learning from many others at the same time.

Rebecca Cynamon-Murphy, a lifelong Presbyterian and lay leader at a Presbymergent church in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago (as well as the coordinator for the Chicago area Emergent Village Cohort), affirms that this is what she appreciates most about her emerging faith community – that it has room for her universalist and pluralist tendencies. As an emergent, she says, “I am more interested in being in community with folks who are moving toward deeper relationships with God and I care not-at-all about doctrinal differences. I believe that our different experiences necessarily create different beliefs about the world and God. The Kingdom of God doesn’t look like a bunch of people who all have the same life stories. Why should church?” For her this is especially relevant since she is married to a practicing Jew. At her church, however, he “feels like it is his community and not just a church he attends with his

⁹⁶ Ibid.

wife.”⁹⁷ This kind of embrace of theological and even religious plurality is one of the ways that Presbymergents like Rebecca seek to radically transform what it means to be Presbyterian.

For others an embrace of convergence and plurality might also include an embrace of new spiritual and liturgical practices, whether in a more contemplative direction, e.g. labyrinths, centering prayer, *lectio divina*, and prayer stations, or in a more techno-driven/multi-sensory/alt.worship direction, e.g. video clips, techno music, live Twitter feeds, coffee and candles. As with the “Relevants” stream of the broader emerging church, however, the point is not merely to appear “hip,” but more importantly to experience God in new ways, and to connect with different types of people for whom traditional forms of Presbyterian worship are wholly irrelevant. Presbymergents are increasingly open to borrowing ideas and practices from other denominations and even non-denominational evangelicals and emergents.

As Troy Bronsink is quick to point out, however, emerging forms of worship and spiritual practice are not just a way to do “contemporary-er” church, nor are they simply an out of hand rejection of tradition as merely “old-fashioned” or “out of date.” Instead, he borrows an architectural metaphor to describe them as a theologically grounded instance of “adaptive re-use.” Just as developers and city-planners attempt to appropriate underutilized buildings from earlier stages in a city’s development and adapt them for new functions (turning old industrial warehouses into a new club district, for instance), so should Presbymergents, according to Bronsink, “ask of all our forms and practices, “how do they *function*?” and “what do they want their environment and liturgy to “do?”” Bronsink, tapping into the Reconstructionist stream of emergence, suggests that Presbymergents (and Presbyterians in general) should be open to radically redesigning those forms and practices that are no longer serving their intended function. He argues, with support from various official Presbyterian statements, that “embedded in the

⁹⁷ Rebecca Cynamon-Murphy, email interview by author, March 6, 2010.

Presbyterian tradition is the radical notion that *forms are provisional*... To follow the intuitions of Presbyterianism is to adapt these forms in order that they might function as players in the eschatological promise known as good news in Jesus the Christ.”⁹⁸

Along these same lines, but beyond simple liturgical practices, Troy and many other Presbymergents also critique the broader forms and structures of Presbyterianism, and indeed, denominationalism as a whole. On this issue there seems to be deep ambivalence among Presbymergents, perhaps because of their very nature as hyphenateds. As mentioned above, many of them cite their Presbyterian polity as one of the many things they continue to appreciate about their tradition. Many find the connectional system helpful, see the democratic authority structures as, at least in theory, capable of allowing for the kind of flattened hierarchies that emergents find appealing, and appreciate the way the PC(USA) has affirmed and empowered female leaders in particular over the past several decades. Carol Howard Merritt for instance, has spoken of how the process of ordination and denominational structure, both of which are often criticized by other emergents, felt to her like an empowering and encouraging system of support for someone like herself coming out of a fundamentalist church background that explicitly disempowered women.⁹⁹ At the same time, many of these same individuals also recognize the disempowering and stultifying effects the denominational bureaucracy can have. For instance, despite her overall affirmation of ordination, in reference to the drama surrounding Adam Walker Cleaveland’s ordination process, Merritt has also been critical of “the pernicious

⁹⁸ Bronsink, “Of Dying Breeds and Swelling Hopes: A Mainline Emergent in the Reformed Tradition,” *Theology, News and Notes* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2008), http://documents.fuller.edu/news/pubs/tnn/2008_Fall/5_mainline_emergent.asp (accessed April 5, 2010). Part II of the article can be found at Presbymergent, entry posted October 10, 2008, <http://presbymergent.org/2008/10/10/a-mainline-emergent-in-the-reformed-tradition/> (accessed April 5, 2010).

⁹⁹ Merritt, email interview by author, March 12, 2010.

ordination hazing that can occur in certain areas of our country.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Presbytermergent conversation surrounding the last General Assembly in 2008 pointed to some of the “parliamentary absurdities” and division surrounding the controversies regarding homosexuality as evidence of why the current system of polity needed to change.¹⁰¹ On an even deeper level, some wonder whether there will be room in the Book of Order for radically different types of Presbyterian congregations, whether neo-monastic communities like Karen Sloan’s Formation House in Pittsburgh,¹⁰² or racially and theologically diverse neighborhood collectives like Troy Bronsink’s Neighbor’s Abbey in Atlanta.¹⁰³ The desire, according to Merritt, is to find enough flexibility in Presbyterian polity for such expressions to flourish and to make a space where creativity can be nurtured.¹⁰⁴ In that same article Jan Edmiston, pastor of Fairlington Church just outside of Washington DC, likewise spoke of the need for a denominational structure that is “creative,” “permission giving,” and “happy to let people be set free.”

Again Bronsink suggests that the solution is for mainline denominations like the PC(USA) to embrace the ethic of adaptive re-use, not just in terms of worship practices, but polity and structure as well. As he puts it:

Awake to the imminent death of our provisional group called the PC(USA), folks like those on [the Atlanta Area Tri-Presbytery Emerging Church Committee], like the dozens of innovative communities starting their own initiatives, and like the hundreds engaging

¹⁰⁰ Merritt, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” TribalChurch.org, entry posted June 4, 2009, <http://tribalchurch.org/?cat=85> (accessed April 6, 2010).

¹⁰¹ See for instance the comments on David Williams, “Next Steps,” Presbytermergent, entry posted July 1, 2008, <http://presbytermergent.org/2008/07/01/next-steps/> (accessed April 6, 2010), or Adam Walker Cleaveland’s post for The Presbyterian Outlook, “Hope for the PC(USA),” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, June 25, 2008, <http://pres-outlook.net/component/content/article/45/7587.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

¹⁰² Sloan, “Intentional Community: A new kind of church planting.”

¹⁰³ Bronsink, “About Troy and Neighbors Abbey,” Church as Art, <http://churchasart.com/blog/neighborsabbeyhome/about/> (accessed April 6, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Leslie Scanlon, “Presbytermergents seek purpose for new, relevant faith expressions,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 29, 2009, <http://pres-outlook.net/news-and-analysis/1-news-a-analysis/8630-presbytermergents-see-purpose-for-new-relevant-faith-expressions.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

the conversation from the periphery, are digging in with depth to the tradition we've been handed and to the context into which God is sending a promised future. The mainline emergents are learning how to "give this whole thing away" for adaptive reuse, with little-to-no strings attached to the sinking ship of our self-interests.¹⁰⁵

Clearly the point for Bronsink, as for other Presbymergents, is not to "save" the PC(USA) as a denomination, but rather to find new life in the midst of its "imminent death" – in a sense to pass through death in hopes of resurrection.

Other Presbymergents are equally adamant that rescuing an institution is not their goal. In summary of the February 2009 gathering of the Coordinating Group in Louisville, for instance, Ryan Kemp-Pappan insisted, "We're not in it to save the Presbyterian church. We're in it to live into the Reformed identity of transformation — to find out what comes next in God's revolutionary movement."¹⁰⁶ Cleaveland agrees with this refusal to "save the denomination," and adds that their hope instead is that through Presbymergent "we might be able to ask the necessary questions to help the Presbyterian Church find its place in the 21st century, in a world that is rapidly changing and in a world that does not seem like an old-world traditional institution that relies heavily on its polity and bureaucracy," regardless of whether this results in long-term institutional renewal or not.¹⁰⁷

Analysis and Conclusion

If Presbymergent is representative of the challenges hyphenated emergents in general face in trying to bridge their inherited traditions and emerging Christianity, then their experiences may serve as a guide for other mainline denominations as well. Firstly, it seems to be the case that the greatest creativity and most energy is found not in resolving all the tensions

¹⁰⁵ Bronsink, "Of Dying Breeds and Swelling Hopes: A Mainline Emergent in the Reformed Tradition"

¹⁰⁶ Scanlon, "Presbymergents seek purpose for new, relevant faith expressions."

¹⁰⁷ Walker Cleaveland, email interview by author, March 16, 2010.

between innovation and tradition, between flexibility and structure, but in allowing the mainline emerging church to simply exist in that liminal space for as long as possible. As long as existing structures are willing to grant freedom and permission for new explorations and experiments, hyphenated emergents appear eager to push the boundaries with one hand, while still ever reaching back to claim the treasures of the past with the other, all the while having one foot planted in each world. The tension that exists is for the most part a creative tension, and denominational structures can harness that if they are willing to create space for fresh expressions of their ancient traditions.

Secondly, mainline emergence can benefit from the creation of connectional networks that help foster this creative tension and conversation among potential hyphenated emergents and other retraditioning leaders within their denominations. As the Presbytermergent experience demonstrates, dedicated conferences, -mergent parties hosted at other denominational events, online conversations, and face-to-face relationships can all help to foster new ideas and new ventures. Active leadership is key here, however, as the history of Presbytermergent has likewise shown. While emergents love the word “organic” to describe how their movement is developing, the reality of “organic,” whether in gardening or in the church, is that it actually takes a lot of work, and unless someone commits to doing it, nothing actually happens.¹⁰⁸ Creating systems that grow organically actually require a great deal of foresight, preparation, structure and good timing, and unless hyphenated emergents within the mainline denominations are deliberate about these things, it’s doubtful whether much, if anything, will emerge. Emergence is not some inevitable and totalizing Hegelian-style synthesis that is historically determined to be the “next

¹⁰⁸ This observation was first offered by Eliacín Rosario-Cruz, a current member of the Emergent Village Council, at the Emergent Village DC Gathering in April of 2009, as recounted to me by my wife who was at the gathering and as restated by Eliacin at “Re-Membering Emergent Village: First Thoughts,” Eliacín Rosario-Cruz blog, entry posted May 4, 2009, <http://eliacin.com/2009/05/04/re-membering-emergent-village-first-thoughts/> (accessed April 6, 2010).

big thing” for any and every denomination, no matter what anyone in those institutions actually does about it. Mainliners need to be prepared for the very real possibility that their institutions could in fact die and emergence may occur in other parts of the church entirely without them. Indeed, as I’ve mentioned, both Bronsink and Jinkins suggest that it is only in honestly and openly facing the very real possibility of their own death that mainline denominations can have any hope of a re-emergence on the other side of the grave.¹⁰⁹

Thirdly, one of the ways that mainline denominations could in fact find renewal and new life is by positioning themselves as welcoming safe-havens for emergents who have found themselves uprooted from other traditions. For example, it seems significant to me that a sizable segment of the Presbymergent leadership are not cradle Presbyterians, but instead eventually found their way to the PC(USA) from more conservative church backgrounds. This is true of Adam Walker Cleaveland, Karen Sloan, Ryan Kemp-Pappan, Carol Howard-Merritt and her husband Brian, and Rebecca Cynamon-Murphy, among many others. For emergents seeking a level of theological freedom and diversity, along with institutional affirmation and support that was lacking in their former contexts, mainline churches have the potential to be a welcoming new home. If these Presbymergent leaders are representative, the PC(USA) seems to have already become one such a haven. To their adopted denominations, these emergent refugees can bring an influx of fresh ideas from other traditions and a willingness to experiment, as well as an outsider’s perspective on the good and bad of the institutional structure and culture of their new home. If existing denominations are open to being unsettled a bit by such innovative and prophetic voices coming into their midst, these emergent refugees could prove to be valuable new partners in the task of institutional renewal and transformation.

¹⁰⁹ Bronsink, “Of Dying Breeds and Swelling Hopes: A Mainline Emergent in the Reformed Tradition”. Jinkins, 28.

Finally, I want to suggest, borrowing a term from Presbytermergent blogger, Drew Tatsuko, that what we see among hyphenated emergents like the Presbytermergents is not anti-denominationalism, nor even just a post-denominationalism per se (though there are those elements), but actually *meta-denominationalism*.¹¹⁰ As Tatsuko argues, terms like post-denominationalism dwell too much on a critique of the past, on a reaction to all that has gone before, and thus thwarts any lasting change for the future. It also ignores the reality that despite their numerical decline, many people still do in fact exist within denominational traditions, and that this is inevitable and even desirable. Instead, he suggests that what many are experiencing is a kind of “meta-denominationalism” which he defines as the experience of or desire to be “*beyond yet with denominational structures of religion.*” Citing Robert Wuthnow’s book *The Restructuring of American Religion*,¹¹¹ Tatsuko points out that most mainline denominations are more similar than different these days, “due to the convergence of theological ideas and leveling off of social classes.” It is this sort of convergence that Tickle and others point to as one of the chief signs of emergence, and which marks groups like Presbytermergent within the mainline denominations. They are the ones in their respective institutions who are the most self-consciously dedicated to both reclaiming some of the treasures of their own tradition, reaching across former divisions to join in conversation with those of other traditions (and thereby appropriate some of their own treasures), and then creatively recombining these into new forms and structures that can accommodate this broader tradition. As Tatsuko suggests, it is in a sense, a new kind of ecumenism that seeks diversity and appreciative coexistence rather than mere unity or unification.

¹¹⁰ Drew Tatsuko, “On Meta-Denominationalism: Emergence through Convergence,” entry posted June 8, 2009, <http://notes-from-offcenter.com/2009/06/08/on-meta-denominationalism-emergence-through-convergence/> (accessed April 6, 2010).

¹¹¹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

But again, what this form of emergence through convergence will ultimately become, whether in the Presbyterian church or in other mainline denominations, is still very much up in the air. It will be whatever those involved in the conversation choose to make of it, and whatever those in charge of the existing structures allow it to become. What that actually will be remains to be seen.

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