

School of Divinity

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Tentative steps towards an Emerging Kirk

At the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland¹ in May 2009, a report was presented by the Ministries Council in collaboration with the Mission and Discipleship Council. The report provided an update on the various discussions which had been taking place within the Church of Scotland on the subject of Emerging Church. It sets out the current views on how Emerging Church might be seen as a useful source of information and inspiration for the Church of Scotland as it engages with an ever-changing culture and society. The report also highlights some of the concerns and issues arising from attempting to model future expressions of worship and church organisation on the emerging models. This essay, as a vehicle for preliminary research into the Church of Scotland's relationship with emerging Church, seeks to do a number of things. The primary focus will be to assess the report for its discussion on how it views the ways in which Emerging Church can be a useful contribution to its own understanding of the Kirk's ongoing mission. Secondly, and only briefly, the pitfalls and problems highlighted by the report will also be assessed to determine whether they have been adequately accounted for. In so doing, it is hoped that the basis will be laid for a more thorough examination of how the Church of Scotland may benefit from the current work and 'conversations' taking place around and with the various expressions of emerging Church. This more detailed examination of the issues will be the basis of my research dissertation.

It should be noted that the joint report presented to the General Assembly in 2009 is neither the beginning nor the end of the matter. It is merely another step in a process of change which underpins the Church of Scotland's understanding of what it means to be a church in the Reformed tradition: reformed and always reforming, being part of its defining affirmations. With that in mind,

¹ The general Assembly is the annual meeting of representatives from across the Church of Scotland. It is the highest court of the Church and meets to enact Church Law. In this essay, the names 'Church of Scotland' and 'the Kirk' may be used interchangeably depending on context. They are, of course, the same entity and it is simply a matter of convenience and ease of reading which will determine which is used in each context.

this essay now turns to the issue of the Church of Scotland's involvement in and understanding of the Emerging Church movement.

Emerging Church has become something of a 'slogan' within church circles in recent years. Depending on your perspective, it is either the greatest innovation to come to the church for a long time, or it is just another passing fad which is only about appearing attractive to society. The main problem with Emerging Church is that it is extremely difficult to define. At its simplest, Emerging Church may be described as a contextual expression of a faith community. The problem is that that word 'contextual' means that there are many different 'expressions' of Emerging Church as each small group or community seeks to engage in relevant and meaningful ways with particular demographic groups, special interest groups or sections of a community. Nor is it intended to be the final say in how church should be organised. Rather it fills particular niches which are not served by traditional models of church.

In a sense, none of this is new to the Church of Scotland. For many years the Kirk has encouraged the establishment of new worshipping communities within local contexts identified as being 'under-provisioned' by the Kirk (or indeed, any church). This initiative has gone under the banner, in recent times, of New Charge Development (NCD), which itself grew out of a post-war Church Extension drive.² What the Kirk does recognise and acknowledge though is that the Emerging Church movement is, in many ways, quite different to how church has grown in the recent past. "Increasing numbers of people find that in order to hold faithfully to the gospel tradition and culture, a way of being the church is needed that is significantly different from what has gone before."³ It is not my intention, in this essay, to trace the history of the Kirk's missional development from those earlier initiatives. Rather, it is my intention to examine how the Church is interacting with this latest expression of church mission.

The question then is, "What does the Church of Scotland understand by Emerging Church?" First of all, it acknowledges that diversity of expression we have previously noted. Furthermore it seeks to avoid becoming attached to particular expressions of Emerging Church. Rather, it desires

² Church of Scotland, "Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church," in *General Assembly* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Church of Scotland by Blackwood, 2009), 3.1/1.

³ Church of Scotland, "Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church," 3.1/2.

to “discern the substantive elements within the emerging church conversation and to consider whether they might, under God, inspire and enrich our own understanding and practice as a church.”⁴ However, notwithstanding being able to learn from others, the Kirk holds that being “one Church catholic”⁵ is the overriding theological descriptor which is the most appropriate for the Kirk. The Kirk therefore sees Emerging Church as a source of reflective practice which can be used to inform and illuminate how the Kirk may be “faithful to the call of God in [its] own time and place.”⁶ The report identifies five ‘moves’ within and associated with Emerging Church which allows the Kirk to bring what is happening there to bear on its own practices. These are *auditing, retrieval, unbundling, supplementing* and *remixing*.⁷ These are not ‘marks’ of Emerging Church in the same sense as the Creedal marks would be used to assess the validity of the established or ‘inherited’⁸ church. Rather, they are being used in this context as ‘characteristics’ which can be drawn upon to inform the practice of the Kirk.

‘Auditing’ is the process whereby the church is engaged in continuous reflective practice. If the Kirk is to be *semper reformanda*, then it must be engaged in that continuous process of critical reflection. The report identifies three areas which are pertinent to the Kirk: “(a) our history and traditions as they bear upon our mission and discipleship now; (b) the gifts and limitations of our reformed tradition as shaped by the history of the Kirk; and (c) what, in the light of scripture, remains vital for our own witness and practice, as well as what needs to be reformed.”⁹ These are not, in and of themselves, a consequence of the Emerging Church movement, but identify the areas of the Kirk’s practice where influences from Emerging Church may be brought to bear. In essence, they delimit the areas within which the practices of Emerging Church may influence change. For example, the Kirk’s reformed tradition is firmly Presbyterian by nature in its governance. This

⁴ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/4.

⁵ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/4.

⁶ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/5.

⁷ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/5.

⁸ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Authentic Media, 2004), 253. Murray uses the term ‘inherited’ in preference to ‘established’ as, in his opinion, ‘established’ can be a loaded term, suggestive of excessive administration and inflexible practice. ‘Inherited’ may be neither of these yet still follow the common model of church over the years.

⁹ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/5.

cannot be said of many expressions of Emerging Church. Indeed, there is pressure from some quarters for expressions of Emerging Church to stand in separation from inherited church structures. Peter Rollins suggests that certain expressions of Emerging Church should “choose not to enter into a more well-defined relationship with the church but actually embrace a less defined, more ambiguous relationship.”¹⁰ This does not preclude the Kirk from learning some lessons from such communities, but potentially limits the value to be gleaned from more independent expressions of church. In particular, the Laws of the Church of Scotland may preclude certain practices where an ordained minister is not present or where parish boundaries are not respected. By the same token, lessons taken from Emerging Church may well put pressure on those same Laws and encourage change for greater flexibility. Such is the nature of reflective practice. It is not simply an issue of seeing what can be fitted within existing structures, but exploring how those structures may themselves have to change to accommodate new understandings and revised practices. Auditing is, therefore, a process of change and adaptation and fits comfortably within the ethos of *semper reformanda*.

‘Retrieval’ is the practice of drawing from the entire history of the Christian church. The breadth of its influence and the duration of its existence provide a rich seam of resources. This may be mined for long-disused practices which have, in times past, fallen out of favour, but now find contextual relevance. This is certainly true of expressions of Emerging Church as they seek to strip away the accumulated habits of the establishment and try to discover a more ‘authentic’ worship experience through the practices of ancient Christian communities. The report does seem to miss out in one area in this regard – that of cross-cultural experience. That said, it is not specifically dismissed in the report. Emerging Church is somewhat eclectic about the areas from which it draws for influence and this is not restricted by time or geography. Drawing from ancient practices is useful and valuable because “they serve as resources from a time when the church did not practice the Western heresy of secularism.”¹¹ This is especially true in areas of liturgy where Emerging Church recognises that “[s]ome structure and rich content are needed to sustain a community over

¹⁰ Peter Rollins, “Biting the hand that feeds,” in *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church*, ed. Martyn Percy and Louise Nelstrop (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2008), 83.

¹¹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures* (SPCK Publishing, 2006), 219.

the long haul”¹² with the caveat that “liturgies are welcomed, provided that they are made culturally accessible with adequate explanation and relational authenticity.”¹³ In a sense, Emerging Church can be seen as a ‘test bed’ or ‘development laboratory’ where liturgy can be re-contextualised and tested for understanding and relevance. This is not to suggest that Emerging Church is reinventing worship, but rather that, by its nature, Emerging Church provides an environment where experimentation in symbolic and creative liturgy and worship is both encouraged and expected.

The term ‘unbundling’ is drawn from the world of computer technology. Manufacturers of computer systems will often ‘bundle’ additional software, programs and utilities, with the system. ‘Unbundling’ is the process of removing the unnecessary additions and ‘accumulations’ whilst retaining the full ‘functionality’ of the underlying system. In church terms, this is an issue of identifying those practices and procedures which have become part and parcel of the ‘establishment’ system. The report identifies two critical aspects to this unbundling process: “(a) selective recovery of practices and dimensions from earlier eras minus the theological package in which they were originally ‘bundled’; (b) adapting, for example, some liturgical practices for contemporary use without compromising a reformed theology.”¹⁴ There is a considerable parallel here with the previous ‘retrieval’ move. The primary difference seems to be one of ‘direction’. With ‘retrieval’ it is a matter of looking at historical practices and seeing which ones may be revived. ‘Unbundling’ starts with what exists now and asks questions of its relevance and necessity. In this regard, Emerging Church performs an especially useful function. It very much sees itself as standing as a challenge to the accumulated practices of inherited church. Its main criticism of inherited church is that “[m]uch of what we understand as historical church practices is simply cultural adaptations that occurred at other times and places in church history. The church must ‘de-absolutize’ many of its sacred cows in order to communicate afresh the good news to a new world.”¹⁵ With both *retrieval* and *unbundling*, there is the risk of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’. The origins of some practices within churches are not always fully understood or clearly remembered. Furthermore, many churchgoers derive comfort and certainty from familiar rituals and

¹² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 224.

¹³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 224.

¹⁴ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/5.

¹⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 19.

practices even though they may have only a tenuous link to the essential doctrines of a church. Much pastoral sensitivity must be exercised in dealing with such changes.

The fourth move, ‘supplementing’, is about being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit here and now through creative influences. The report makes it clear that these influences are wide-ranging and can include technological advancement (citing the examples of the printing press and pipe organ), theological change (ordination of women, environmental ethics) or the arts (hymn-singing or floral art).¹⁶ It is certainly the case that Emerging Church draws heavily on the first and last of these creative impulses for its worship. It is often the case that the two even go hand-in-hand, such as, but not restricted to, the use of multimedia during worship meetings. “Creativity within the context of the emerging church is not simply an expression of the human spirit or a demonstration of personal ego. Rather, it provides evidence of the fact that we are made in the image of God. Creativity represents the outpouring of the gifts of God in all their amazing diversity and generosity.”¹⁷ Although attitudes are changing, there is still some scepticism of technology within the Kirk, some seeing it as a distraction where the message is overwhelmed by the media. There is also the deeply-ingrained suspicion, perhaps common to many Reformed churches, that the use of visual arts borders on iconography.

‘Remixing’, the fifth move, also draws from contemporary technology. It is a term used in music and video production and refers to the process of taking data from multiple sources, putting together a new blend or mix of those sources thereby creating something new. In this context it is a reference to the ecumenical dimension to be found within the Church of Scotland; the mix of ‘voices’ from conversations taking place across denominations. It is also the focus of the other ‘moves’ which have already been discussed. These, along with the existing initiatives happening within the Kirk, represent the multitude of sources from which new forms of worship and worshipping communities can be created. As with the first ‘move’, this is not directly influenced by expressions of Emerging Church. The influence takes place within the other contexts identified previously and is, here, part of the overall ‘melting pot’ of ideas. It is here that it may be that the

¹⁶ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/5.

¹⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 179.

missing element of cross-cultural influences may be included (as part of the ecumenical conversation), although this is not made explicit (or even implicit) in the report.

Having looked at the Kirk's view of Emerging Church and its planned method of engagement, the essay now turns its attention, albeit briefly, to the potential pitfalls and problems opened up by such engagement. Once again these are broadly outlined in the report and they will now be highlighted and commented upon.

The report affirms the underlying values of the Church of Scotland: “[W]e recognise the scriptures as authoritative, we uphold the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, we believe there is one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and we are committed to the practice of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁸ The report goes on to affirm the distinctive attributes of the “Presbyterian Kirk which: (a) is governed by elders; (b) subscribes to the Westminster Confession of Faith; (c) is accountable to church courts; (d) recognises lawful ordination.”¹⁹ In these affirmations, the Kirk sets out the expectations for any expressions of Emerging Church which would be supported by it. This is perhaps the most problematic area for the Kirk. Many expressions of Emerging Church do not readily ‘tick all the boxes’. That does not, however, preclude the possibility of learning from them, as has been stated already. The report goes on to explore some of the implications of ongoing change and poses the question, “Should this forever involve an exact replication of the existing formats, titles and structures?”²⁰ This question lies at the heart of the Kirk’s interaction with Emerging Church. If all it wants to do is ‘cherry-pick’ those parts of Emerging Church which fit within the current structures then it runs the risk of losing some of the ‘freshness’ of Emerging Church. At worst, it misuses those elements which it has adopted as it attempts to squeeze them in to a structure to which they simply do not belong or fit comfortably. The report does go some way to acknowledging these difficulties but leaves the impression that it would be happier allowing

¹⁸ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/6.

¹⁹ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/6.

²⁰ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/7.

Emerging Church to continue to find its own way in the world, albeit with the prayerful blessing of the Kirk:

“Our concern to explore these questions does not mean that we are committed to recognising any initiative, anyhow, anywhere. We recognise that there will be many initiatives outwith the Kirk. Our dialogue with some groups may lead to our praying God’s blessing on their work but concluding that their journey cannot fit within our polity and structures as a church.”²¹

Such an approach may indeed be a sensible way forward, but it does not, I believe, acknowledge the reality of a changing worldview in society. The Emerging Church movement has grown out of dissatisfaction with inherited expressions of church. Those who are attracted to Emerging Church would, I believe, be considered to have, or have sympathy with, a postmodern worldview. The inherited church is still firmly rooted in a modern worldview which sees things, according to postmodern critique, in too dualistic a way. In this case it seems that the structures of the Kirk may bend a little but they must remain fundamentally unchanged. There can be, therefore, no accommodation of expressions of church which do not fit within those structures. A postmodern perspective simply asks why there needs to be structures. As the proportion of postmodern thinkers within the Kirk grows then the pressure to change may reach the point where something has to ‘give’ and change is enforced. Alternatively, the other scenario is that they leave and the Kirk gradually declines until it becomes a minority church. However, it may also be that this somewhat dualist view is overly pessimistic and that gradual change will always come about through the steady pressure of those who seek to be part of a reformed and reforming church.

In conclusion, the report presents what I believe to be a very pragmatic approach to the constantly changing face of Emerging Church. I do not necessarily mean this as a compliment. Rather than simply jump on the bandwagon Emerging Church can sometimes appear to be, the Kirk has adopted a more considered ‘look and learn’ approach. Indeed, there is much to learn from the Emerging Church, not least in the areas of creative and contextualised worship and liturgy. I do

²¹ Church of Scotland, “Joint Report of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils on the Emerging Church,” 3.1/7.

wonder however if it risks always being on the coat-tails of a movement. Any initiative or movement will have a strong degree of attraction based on its novelty value. Anyone coming along later and adopting similar models will risk losing the interest of a significant proportion of a group as they have either become disillusioned or have moved on to the next novelty. That said, church is not simply about attracting numbers and so learning from the successes and mistakes of those who break new ground is a valuable part of the process of 'always reforming'. Furthermore, Emerging Church is largely about engaging with the growing influence of a postmodern worldview; and therein lie the main challenges. The Church of Scotland is very proud of its heritage and its sense of identity. A full engagement with Emerging Church would require significant changes to its practices and procedures and, at the moment, such changes do not seem to be countenanced. In this respect the pragmatic approach begins to look like an avoidance of the need to consider seriously the changes necessary to adapt to shifts in society.

As was stated at the beginning of this essay, it must be acknowledged that this report simply represents a step along the way on a journey of exploration into the future shape of the Church of Scotland. As such it is only laying out some of the issues at stake and suggesting a possible way forward in adapting to changing circumstances. The production of more detailed reports and deeper explorations of the issues raised will continue to exercise the minds of the associated committees and advisors. It is into that greater unknown that my main dissertation research, of which this essay represents only a part, must now continue.

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