

# THE CHALLENGE OF THE EMERGENT CULTURE FOR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

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I first encountered the *Emergent Church* movement in March 2004 when I attended the National Pastors and Emergent Church Conference in San Diego. I had read a bit about this emergent movement that seemed to have developed as a response to the mega-church movement that had dominated the church growth scene since the late 1960s in the United States. Yet in the United Kingdom where the Emergent Churches were having great success attracting younger generations the growth of this movement was clearly a reaction to a stagnant religious situation. In North America as well as the UK, people were looking for a community where they could live out their values in a postmodern world, in part because they had found the existing congregations wanting. At the conference in San Diego I met Dan Kimball and Brian McLaren, recognized as leaders in the emergent church in the United States. Dan, a Gen Xer, is a pastor at Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, CA; he has been a prolific writer on the subject as well as practitioner. Brian, a Baby Boomer, is founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in MD. He has written philosophical books, some have been best sellers, about Christianity in a postmodern world. He is recognized as a leading spokesperson for the emergent culture.

There is no one description of the emergent movement, no one style of worship, nor one style of congregation. Bob Whitesel's book, *Inside the Organic Church* shares the stories of twelve emerging congregations from the US, UK, and Canada. The congregations range from 25 to 10,000, attendees with five being what we would consider small congregations (under 200) and only two mega-church size (over 1500). Whitesel writes that emergent "is a self applied label, [it] connotes perceived parallels with the so-called emerging postmodern philosophy... emerging churches are a branch of Christian expression created and led by young people." Some of these congregations meet in warehouses, one moved to the center city for its social witness, others do outreach in coffee shops and clubs. Many of these congregations have small groups that meet regularly, they also do social justice work in the community together.

In Dan Kimball's 2003 book, *The Emerging Church*, Rick Warren wrote in the Foreword: "never attach your church to a single style, you'll soon be passé and outdated." This seems to fit with the findings in regard to worship in the *Faith Communities Today* survey where it was reported that congregations that had changed the style of worship were the ones that were growing. In 2004 Michael Moynagh wrote *emergentchurch.intro*. Early in the book he states, "Experiments are one of the defining features of emerging church." The congregations described by the various authors on the emergent movement (see the bibliography at the end of this paper) and those I have visited vary greatly in form. In the majority of congregations even the style of service varies from week to week. Dan Kimball declared in his introduction, "While many of us have been preparing sermons and keeping busy with internal affairs of our

churches, something alarming has been happening outside.” He goes on to describe a post-Christian world that no longer accepts the standard creeds and forms of the traditional Christian church.

Kimball’s most recent book is *They Like Jesus But Not The Church*. In it he discusses his experience in reaching out to young adults and college students. In surveys he conducted he found that young people felt that Jesus wasn’t into organized religion, judgmental and negative, into male dominated religion, homophobic, disrespectful of people of other faiths or a fundamentalist who took the whole Bible literally. Such findings should not be a surprise since the younger generations (those born since 1970) have grown up in a more openly pluralistic and diverse society than their parents or grandparents. The younger generations are more likely to accept gay marriage, have close friends of a different ethnicity or race, and not see abortion as major faith issue. (Although recent Gallup and Barna Polls do show when asked about abortion their views are the same as their parents, they are against it.) They are more likely to care about the environment, health care, and be open to drawing on non-Christian traditions for their spiritual journey. In other words, the emergent culture has moved away from the black and white culture we have heard from the likes of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Kennedy. A recent Gallup Poll found that among the 40% of people in the U.S who do not attend church or synagogue regularly the main reasons were that they don’t agree with organized religion and don’t believe in going to church, this fits with the emergent cultures’ suspicion of traditional congregations.

In his article in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Brian McLaren wrote that “we see ourselves as the *church emerging*, meaning a growing edge of the church at large in all its forms, stretching from the margins into new territory beyond modern, Western Christianity.” In the following paragraph he expanded on this thought: “That means we are emerging into a postcolonial faith, a post-Western faith – not a faith that wants to forget and deny the many blessings of Christian faith...but a faith that no longer wants to be in denial about the dark side of our history.” McLaren has faced a stream of criticism because of his push for Christians to follow Jesus’ teachings and help the poor, to be open to the stranger, and question the powerful. He works with a wide range of evangelicals and mainstream congregations in an attempt to redefine the Kingdom of God for a postmodern world. In fact the majority of emergent congregations are creating new connections around community and worldwide issues. In Gibbs and Bolger’s book, *Emerging Churches*, they quote Holly Rankin Zaher of the Three Nails congregation in Pittsburgh as saying, “We partner with others who seem to embody kingdom values and are doing kingdom work, even if they are not ‘orthodox’ Christians. We collect cans with Unitarians...”

Robert Webber has an introduction, a conclusion and several appendixes in a recent book he edited, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*. In the book five pastors of emergent congregations share their perspectives on theology of the emergent movement. I actually find Webber’s pieces to be the most useful. In the conclusion he discusses the five contributors from a number of angles. He talks about the culture from which they emerged, summarizes the core of their message and suggests what the reader needs to listen to from these pastors. Webber suggests these emergent leaders are “reminding us we are living in a new world;” that pastors “have not been trained to minister in this world;” and that they suggest “theology and practice must be brought

back together again.” Webber goes on to state that this “emergent movement is marked by diversity” and that the leaders are doing theology “out of practice, not out of abstraction.” The leaders of the emergent movement are also creating a theology that is not tied together by reason and logic but open to mystery. Lastly, Webber suggests that the emergent culture is one that is striving to speak to today’s culture, not the world of yesterday. This is all the more important since we live in a time that he says “is no longer secular, but at the horizon now shaped by an incredible appetite for *worship* and *spirituality*.” Once more I find these challenges to be precisely the same areas we Unitarian Universalists are grappling with in our theological schools and our congregations. It is also interesting that I found the theological discussions of most of these pastors to be very close to Liberation Theology but rarely, if ever, have I found a reference to Liberation Theology in the work of the emergent leaders.

The emergent congregations have diverse ways of connecting to their communities and different ways of coming together. They do use music that speaks to their generation including hip-hop, heavy metal, and rap but some also hold Taize services and meditative services or parts of services with djembe-style drumming. Often their services include time for participants to share or for participants to visit various stations that offer opportunities to create art that speaks to the theme of the service or to journal, pray or meditate. To get a sense of some of the diversity in these congregations I have pulled some quotes from web sites of three congregations.

The St. Thomas Church of Sheffield, UK describes their gatherings (notice they are not called worship services) on their web site:

**Our Sunday gatherings are when many of our smaller communities/clusters gather together each week in the Conference Centre.** They're our opportunity to meet with God in a larger gathering and to listen to what he is saying, both through people speaking from the front and through learning how to hear him for ourselves. It's where we bring all our personal responses/ relationships with Jesus and mingle them together to hear the big picture - to raise a louder shout of praise, to pray for our world and to learn how to relate our faith-life with our work-life, community-life and home-life. **Whatever stage of life you're at, whatever stage of faith--even if you don't know God in any way--you're welcome.** There's chances to get prayer for healing and we always end with coffee and opportunities to chat.

The Bridge community in Phoenix, AZ declares their mission as engaging the movement of God. Their mission page states: “you are welcome and encouraged to be a part of our inner-city community center where we distribute food boxes and clothing 5 days a week, feel free to stop by any morning to join in the cause!”

The web page from the Vintage Faith congregation that Dan Kimball serves declares that there is a

rising feeling among emerging church leaders and followers of Jesus, that in many modern contemporary churches, something has subtly gone astray in what we call “church” and what we call “Christianity”. Through time, church has become a place that you go to have your needs met,

instead of being a called local community of God on a mission together. Through time, much of contemporary Christianity subtly has become more about inviting others into the subcultures of Christian music, language and church programs than about passionately inviting others into a radically alternative community and way of life as disciples of Jesus and Kingdom living.

These examples from the web pages of these emergent congregations speak to the desire of younger generations to connect to their culture, to be change agents in today's world and at the same time connect to their spiritual yearnings. Yet they are distrustful of the organized religious institutions or at least unable to find what they want within the structures of the existing religious world.

The importance of understanding the emergent culture and the emergent congregations within the Christian ranks for Unitarian Universalists is that we live in the same world and the same communities. We have similar concerns about reaching out to younger generations to share our saving story just as these emergent Christian congregations are doing with their story. The emergent congregations are attracting people who want authentic and open spiritual experiences that will also help connect them to engagement with social concerns in their communities and the world, certainly a UU commitment. Interestingly these desires are not far off from the 60% of people that the Gallup poll identified as going to regular religious worship mainly for spiritual growth and guidance and because it keeps them grounded. Yet those attracted to emergent congregations are looking for a different way to come together in community. The standard worship experience does not appeal to many young people. They are looking for something that helps them relate the fast paced digital world in which they live, to their deep concerns of the spirit and the world they will inherit from older generations. They see themselves as actually going back to the true message of Jesus. Thus some emergent authors have written about the ancient/future church, discussing a return to the core message from Jesus while speaking to current culture. People in the emergent movement believe they are not changing the core Christian message, they are just finding a way to get the story to people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The challenge we Unitarian Universalists face is how to get our story out because it seems to me that those in the emergent culture are open to our diverse and pluralistic tradition. Can we create outreach ministries that build on the understanding of the emergent culture? It may be that by our existing congregations creating multi-site locations we can serve the emergent culture more directly. Maybe this is where the discussion of internet congregations, like comes into play as well. At the very least we need to be in conversation about how we can move into the postmodern world reaching the emerging culture, many of whom I am convinced are looking for what we offer or can offer.

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<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/> 20 something written magazine on culture and religion

<http://uucyf.org/> UU site of the Church of the Younger Fellowship

[www.submergence.org](http://www.submergence.org) Karen Ward's blog