

# THE HYPHENATEDS

*To Mom and Dad,  
for teaching me the stories  
(Deut. 6:7)*

# THE HYPHENATEDS

How Emergence Christianity Is  
Re-Traditioning Mainline Practices

Edited by Phil Snider



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As always, I reserve my deepest thanks for my family: Amanda, Eli, Sam, and Lily Grace. We are learning the stories together, just as my mom and dad taught the stories to me when I was a child. It is to my parents that I dedicate this book.

—Phil Snider





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# Foreword

Religion books, generally speaking, are not exciting. At least not in my experience. And never . . . absolutely never . . . are they exhilarating. I can say that with renewed confidence nowadays, because the exception that proves my rule is in your hands this very moment.

About every five hundred years or so, our latinized civilization goes through a period of upheaval and the reconfiguration of all its parts, including its forms and presentations of religion and much of its theology. We are in such a time now. Just as in the sixteenth century we named the upheaval as The Great Reformation, so now, five centuries later, we speak of our twenty-first-century tsunami as The Great Emergence.

The Great Reformation gave us humanism, the rise of the middle class, the birth of capitalism, the growth of the nation-state, and so on. It also gave us Protestantism as a new or fresh expression of the Christian faith. In a similar way, The Great Emergence is giving us globalization, the extended family, extreme urbanization, social networking, and so on; and along with all of these, Emergence Christianity as a new or fresh expression of Christian faith.

Protestantism, when used as an overarching term, simply names a set of sensibilities and values shared by a very multifaceted form of Christian belief and praxis. Were that not true, there would only be Protestants and not distinct denominations such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and so on, all flying under the banner of Protestantism. Thus it is with Emergence Christianity as well. That is to say that the words “Emergence Christianity” name a set of values and sensibilities shared by some half-dozen or so distinct groups functioning within and under the larger label. Gathered under Emergence Christianity, for instance, are Emerging Church, Emergents, Neo-monastics, Missional Church, and so on, and, most remarkable of all, I suspect, the Hyphenateds.

While one can easily draw many parallels between The Great Reformation and our own Great Emergence, there are also some significant differences; and from the point of view of religion, none of those differences is more absorbing to watch or more portentous than is the presence within Emergence Christianity of the Hyphenateds. They have no analog. They occupy new territory. They are the future for millions of Christians.

Hyphenateds, by definition, are Christians who are citizens of The Great Emergence and appreciators of its values, assets, and ways of being, as well as of the theological questions it is eliciting. At one and the same

time, however, they are also reverent and proud inheritors of the traditions, praxis, and structure of their own inherited denominations and communions. They wish, in other words, to retain the best of the institutional Church and meld it seamlessly with the best of Emergence Church. They got their strange name as a direct result of that intention.

Originally, Christians who sought to “re-tradition”<sup>1</sup> the inherited or institutional Church were called Metho-mergents, Presby-mergents, Catho-mergents, Luther-mergents, Angli-mergents, and so on, and thus their name. In time and as their numbers grew somewhat exponentially, the hyphens became an annoyance and were dropped. The result was Methomergents, Presbymergents, Cathomergents, and so on. The form changed, in other words, but the name stuck.

And by any name, they need watching, for what they are about is a totally new thing.

What they are about is changing in some God-drenched ways the face of both the Faith and the Church. This book, then, is exhilarating, because it is, so far as I know, the first volume to collect some of America’s Hyphenated leaders and thinkers into one set of covers for public viewing. Here a baker’s dozen of the most influential Hyphenateds in this country talk boldly and unapologetically about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why they are doing it.

Whether one is an Emergence Christian or a mainline Christian or a traditional Christian or even a disaffected Christian, one has the opportunity here to look at the future through the lens of an evolving present. What’s written here is intimately told, without apology, and with no holds barred. The writers do not all agree with one another or with other theorists and observers like me; but what they do agree about is the passion of the call, its immediacy, and its holiness. Let us pray God may grant them traveling mercies all the way home.

—Phyllis Tickle

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The term “re-traditioning” was first coined by the scholar Diana Butler Bass several years ago and has become the name of choice for what the Hyphenateds are about.

# Introduction

*Phil Snider*

*It would be a mistake to think that the critique of Christianity as a religion is primarily an attack that is launched by those outside the tradition; rather, it would be better to think of it as an integral part of Christianity itself.*

—PETER ROLLINS<sup>1</sup>

*Christians are bound by a tradition whose goal, if we allow it, is to set us free.*

—DOUGLAS JOHN HALL<sup>2</sup>

In the heart of John Calvin's beloved Geneva, two contrasting images stand opposite one another. On one side of the main town square stands St. Peter's Cathedral, a striking architectural wonder that has dominated the center of the city ever since construction began on the original building in 1160. The hallowed ground of St. Peter's has long represented the power and allure of the institutional church, and it is best known as the cathedral that John Calvin commandeered as part of the Reformation, making it the hub of his preaching from 1536 to 1564.

Yet on the opposite side of the town square stands a statue of the prophet Jeremiah, which was carved by one of Rodin's students as an act of protest against the institutional church. Jeremiah's face is provocatively turned away from St. Peter's Cathedral in frustration and disgust, representing the righteous critique that always accompanies the prophet's witness.

When confronted with these contrasting images, one is tempted to determine which best represents the proper Christian perspective. Should one's loyalties be with the institutional church, which is the guardian and curator of sacred traditions held dear? Or should one join Jeremiah's prophetic protest, which always calls into question the practices of institutions, particularly institutions that claim to hold the power and authority on all things orthodox?

It is commonly assumed that the statue of Jeremiah represents Christians who have engaged the emerging church conversation over the better part of the last ten to fifteen years (a conversation that goes by many names, as we will discuss later). They are viewed as protestors who have turned

away from the institutional church in disgust. Conversely, Christians who remain loyal to the institutional church (even those churches that were birthed as part of a protesting movement) are often viewed as representatives of St. Peter's Cathedral: those who consistently resist and domesticate the vision of Jeremiah, often because of an unspoken desire to maintain power and authority. This tension has become even more pronounced within the changing landscape of postmodern culture, when it seems as if so many established institutional churches and practices (read denominational churches and practices) are on the way out, and no one knows what kind of ecclesiastical communities will be forged in their wake.

Yet to understand the current ecclesiastical milieu in such a polarizing way not only misses the import of emergence Christianity, but also misreads the structure and purpose of Christian traditions in general, particularly those shaped by a reformed perspective. A more helpful understanding recognizes that both St. Peter's Cathedral and the statue of Jeremiah need each other, both are dependent upon each other, and both operate out of a deep commitment to the Christian tradition.

This can be compared to the theologian's calling to be both "bound and free."<sup>3</sup> On one hand, theologians are *bound* to the schools of thought they have inherited, that is, the traditions that have formatively shaped them. On the other hand, the responsibility of the theologian is to be set *free* from these schools in order to develop new frameworks for understanding that can move Christian theology forward. Moving into these new frameworks doesn't denigrate the traditions that have been handed over, but, quite to the contrary, is only possible because of them. For any kind of new theological work to be done, one must have served a kind of apprenticeship to the tradition, an apprenticeship that binds one to what has been handed over, precisely in order for one to be faithful to the given tradition by being set free from it. In other words, the test of our authentic appropriation of the tradition is ultimately about whether or not it leads to the birth pangs of theological freedom. From this perspective, the tradition can be viewed not just in terms of a static inheritance that we receive, but rather as a task that we do.<sup>4</sup>

In the same way, contrary to the popular distortion, mainline church leaders on the precipices of emergence Christianity are not abandoning the traditions that have shaped them; rather, they are attempting to faithfully appropriate their beloved traditions in new and innovative ways. They are part of what Diana Butler Bass has called a "re-traditioning,"<sup>5</sup> and they recognize that being responsible to the tradition demands that new life spring from it. As Peter Rollins observes,

The Christian is one who is, in the moment of being a Christian (i.e., standing in a particular tradition), also the one who rejects it (remembering the prophets of old who warned us about how



any tradition could become idolatrous)—betraying it as an act of deep fidelity.<sup>6</sup>

This is why the church, in order to be faithful to its once and future task, always stands between the images of St. Peter's Cathedral and the statue of Jeremiah, embracing both the tradition and the prophet's critique of the tradition, manifesting elements of both priest and prophet, sometimes even undermining the tradition as a result of being apprenticed to the tradition.<sup>7</sup>

The essays in this book stand between these two images as well, thus offering space for Christian communities to consider how they might move forward in ways that are both faithful and prophetic. Indeed, this is the radical space that defines emergence Christianity.

In the following pages, several prominent leaders from mainline communities share their hopes, dreams, and visions for the future of the mainline church. Each of the contributors can be referred to as a "hyphenated Christian," which is to say a Christian who has roots in both emergence Christianity and the mainline church (Presbyterians, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and so on). With a passion for mainline traditions and an understanding of emergence Christianity—coupled with the recognition that these are not separate entities—hyphenated Christians offer a vibrant and contagious vision of the ways in which mainline communities might faithfully and prophetically incarnate the love of Christ in the midst of an ever-changing postmodern world. Contributors to this volume offer wisdom from a variety of contexts: Some pastor churches that are typically referred to as emerging or missional, while others are engaged in ministry at more established congregations. Some are scholars or professors, while others are graduate students. Though the bulk of the emergent conversation has been dominated by the voices of Eurocentric males, this collection is much more diverse in scope.

As the essays in this book show, the mainline church has a very bright future. It just may not always look like what we expect.

### **Emergence Christianity: A Very Brief History**

Over the last several years, theorists have tried to get a handle on the import of the emerging church conversation that dominated Christian circles throughout the first decade of the new millennium, and several theorists now use the phrase "emergence Christianity" (first coined by Phyllis Tickle) in order to capture the dynamics that have been at play throughout this time frame.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 2000s, the emerging church was all the rage, especially in evangelical contexts. Books were written from a variety of emerging perspectives, and conferences were organized in order to discuss the "emergent church." Even PBS joined the parade by putting together a documentary that explored whether or not the emerging church would represent the

definitive way of embodying Christian community in the twenty-first century. Some proponents viewed the emerging conversation as the salvation of the church, while others decried it as the latest in a series of fashionable “postmodern” or “liberal” heresies. Most of the participants who gravitated toward emergent Christianity viewed it as a way to enter into conversation with others about what it means to be a Christian, all the while valuing the commitment to share in meaningful Christian community even while leaving room for disagreement on various doctrinal issues. For the most part, emergents held to the conviction that love, not doctrine, held them together.

Simultaneously, several new Christian communities were radically reconsidering cherished practices of the church. In the early days of emergent Christianity, these communities consisted largely of evangelical expatriates who had grown increasingly uncomfortable with what they viewed as trite and superficial forms of contemporary worship (“four songs in the key of perpetually happy,” as Sally Morgenthaler memorably described it), and they longed to return to worship practices that drew upon ancient traditions and rich symbols of the faith.

These new “emergent churches” were enamored with theology. As a result, they started asking all kinds of questions about the theological meaning of every single practice of the church. They sought to inscribe all their communal activities with theological depth. So for instance, when couches in a circle replaced pews in a row, it wasn’t because couches were more hip and trendy or neo-Beatnik than pews but rather because sitting in a circle conveyed a sense of participation and mutuality as opposed to observation and hierarchy, which, to them, was an important theological statement to make. Inscribing every ecclesiastical practice with theological meaning extended well beyond worship, and soon emergent communities were challenging Christians of all stripes to seriously evaluate why they do what they do. Though one of the early critiques of emergent Christianity was that it baptized the church in the name of the culture, a more thorough analysis revealed that it was actually coming much closer to doing the opposite. In the process—almost as a by-product—emergent communities challenged established churches to ask if their tried-and-true practices were more informed by theological convictions or cultural norms. The answers were sometimes disturbing.

Of course, several groups wanted to hitch themselves to the “emerging” bandwagon. It looked like the new way of being church, especially among younger generations. It was believed that, with a few cosmetic changes here and there, congregations could go through a metamorphosis of sorts and wondrously come out on the other side as an “emerging church,” which would then put them in the coveted position of connecting with Millennials and Gen Xers in the same way that Willow Creek and Saddleback had connected with Baby Boomers a generation or two before.

This perspective led to the most substantial rift that took place in the emerging conversation, even among those who were incredibly instrumental in the earliest stages of emergent Christianity and initially shared many of the same goals. The main impasse had to do with theological doctrine. For many, the emerging church was supposed to be nothing more than a new way of doing church in a so-called postmodern culture,<sup>9</sup> an approach that could make church more relevant and interesting for younger people who otherwise had no interest. These folks argued that emerging expressions of Christianity pointed to a *style* that should be implemented in order to help evangelical congregations connect with the “unchurched.” The idea was no different from any other gimmicky approach that tried to get people through the doors of the church so that the standard evangelical message (which by the latter part of the twentieth century, due to the influence of the religious right, had become ultraconservative, bordering on fundamentalism) could be shared with as many young people as possible.

By contrast, others involved in the conversation continued to emphasize that the most important aspect of emergent Christianity wasn’t primarily about style. For them, stylistic concerns were always secondary to theological concerns, and, more to the point, these folks were interested in reevaluating the standard evangelical message they had received as children in order to cultivate a whole new approach to Christianity. They soon discovered, however, that their newfound faith was actually very similar to the kind of theology that had been valued by lots of other Christians for many years, particularly mainline Christians, and it didn’t take very long for “emergents” to start collaborating with mainline voices. In recent years, this collaboration has become quite explicit, particularly as seen in public attempts to pair emergent theological approaches with progressive ones.<sup>10</sup>

It became clear that what was taking place under the umbrella of the “emerging church” wasn’t an entirely new way of being church or of being Christian. Rather, the emerging moment helped Christians from a variety of contexts to (1) encounter wider Christian traditions that have come before and (2) consider ways to reappropriate these traditions in creative, authentic, and culturally accessible ways. Because the emerging moment challenged Christians from established communities to also reappropriate their respective ecclesiastical traditions in authentic ways, it’s not surprising that throughout this time period a handful of mainline communities began cultivating fresh, emerging expressions of church that prized theological integrity and cultural accessibility.

So an odd assortment of things was happening at the same time: Former evangelicals were developing new Christian communities grounded in progressive theology (including young suburbanites who sold their possessions and moved into poor neighborhoods in order to incarnate radical expressions of discipleship through “new monastic” practices); mainliners were reappropriating their traditions because of the cues they received

from emergents; some evangelical expatriates were finding a home in established mainline congregations; and younger Christians as a whole were trying to find a way to move past the narrow version of religious right fundamentalism that had dominated their childhood and adolescence. The Christian landscape had swiftly moved toward what Phyllis Tickle describes as the emerging center, and as such the old categories that easily delineated one group from another group started to wear thin, and a more fluid understanding of church—one that transcends rigid structures—was beginning to blossom.<sup>11</sup>

With all these dynamics at play, it no longer seemed accurate to continue describing the “emerging church” as if it were some sort of separate entity unto itself, treating it like it was something “over there.” It became clear that the emerging moment had given birth to a much broader conversation across the landscape of North American Christianity, encompassing evangelicals, mainliners, Roman Catholics, and a variety of other Christian communities as well. The influence of the emergent conversation became so pronounced that it is now much more helpful to describe what is taking place in terms of an action (verb) than an entity (noun). Hence the reason that many have gravitated toward the language of “emergence Christianity” as opposed to the “emerging church,” and why several other theorists wish to move away from emerging/emergence language entirely.<sup>12</sup>

### **A Reformed Church Always Reforming?**

It’s often pointed out that mainline denominations have mistakenly and superficially understood emergence Christianity as a kind of formula that if implemented properly can result in younger members joining dying congregations, and I agree that this approach is as widespread as it is problematic. But perhaps even more problematic is the way in which established mainline institutions eagerly declare themselves open to the structural critiques that “emergents” or “hyphenateds” have to share, only to ensure that the more radical implications of these critiques do not fully hit home.

To understand the subtleties of this dynamic, it’s helpful to recall St. Francis of Assisi’s critiques of the Roman Catholic Church (which also hold true for many Protestant churches of today). You’ll remember that St. Francis was not a fan of all the glitz and glamour that accompanied the most dominant expressions of the Catholic Church, and he repeatedly charged the church with betraying its commitment to live as Jesus Christ lived, particularly in terms of poverty and nonviolence. Initially, church authorities were very uneasy with St. Francis’ order of lay monks (the Friars Minor, or “lesser brothers”), and they refused to recognize the Friars Minor as an order for obvious reasons: Their critiques cut way too close to home. However, over the course of time, the Catholic Church changed its strategy in dealing with St. Francis and his ragtag band of followers, and it has been argued that the change in strategy was not done in order to honor

the radical critiques of the Friars Minor, as one might expect, but rather to do the exact opposite. In a surprising turn of events, the Catholic Church officially recognized the Friars Minor as an order, and this is of course what gave the church the ability to say that it had indeed opened itself to the critiques of the Friars Minor (so much so that it created a space for them!). But you can make the case that the very act of creating a space for the Friars Minor is precisely what allowed the church to ignore the order's more radical critiques. *You could go so far as to say that creating this space is exactly what gave the church the freedom to continue doing business as usual.* After all, if someone challenged them on their actions they could say, "Hold on just a second! Don't forget we've also got the Friars Minor! See, we care about poverty and nonviolence!" It's the classic-case scenario of doing something so that nothing really changes.

When established mainline structures "create space" for emergents, they often come quite close to making the same mistakes. In the process, much-needed critiques fall by the wayside, for they too become domesticated and colonized. Therefore, as you read the essays in this book, perhaps instead of asking, "Does emergence Christianity help established structures 'make space' for others?" it is better to ask, "Does emergence Christianity help established structures undergo radical transformation?" The difference is more significant than most established structures care to admit.<sup>13</sup>

Our task today is no different from the one that has occupied Christians for centuries, including the beloved lesser brother St. Francis, who, out of his deep love for the church and the traditions that so formatively shaped him, shared a heartfelt desire for reform within the body of the church:

[St. Francis] saw such reform as always necessary, given the frailty and sinfulness of a human institution. He and his communities walked a most difficult path: remaining in a sin-filled church while offering her a prophetic challenge. He and the first communities [of the Friars Minor] served as a constant critique to the church, living as they did the gospel without gloss, a witness that called the entire household of faith to do the same. To the church's ostentation, inattention to the poor, neglect of pastoral responsibilities, complicity in the violence of the state, and general situation of decline, the emerging Franciscan movement offered both a strong condemnation and a corrective. It was the communal example of Francis and his followers, rather than rhetoric, which offered the critique and provided the challenge.<sup>14</sup>

It is my hope that the essays in this volume will help you and your ecclesiastical communities faithfully stand between the images of prophet and priest, and in so doing provide communal examples of critique and challenge that are rooted not only in the tradition of a reformed church

always reforming, but also a reformed church always transforming. *To the glory of God, and for the sake of the world.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete, 2008), 130. I am also indebted to Pete for pointing me to the image of St. Peter's Cathedral in Geneva, which I discuss in the introduction, as well as the insight about St. Francis.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 22.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow this imagery from Hall. See *Bound and Free*, 18–26.

<sup>4</sup> See Hall, 21–22. For the idea of inheritance (read tradition) not so much as what we receive but rather as a task that we do, see Yvonne Sherwood, *Derrida's Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation* (Herndon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 2004); see also *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 133–34.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. See also Michael Naas, *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed history, see Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008) or Phil Snider and Emily Bowen, *Toward a Hopeful Future: Why the Emergent Church Is Good News for Mainline Congregations* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Richard Rorty was right: The term “postmodern” became so overused that it is now too fuzzy to convey anything.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) and Snider and Bowen's *Toward a Hopeful Future*, as well as recent conferences such as Theology After Google and Big Tent Christianity. For a critique of this pairing, see Matthew Gallion's essay in chapter 8 of this book, “The Postmodern Pan and the ForeverNeverland.”

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive analysis, see Phyllis Tickle's *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> It is notable that Doug Pagitt, one of the earliest and most formative voices within the emergent conversation, is interested in moving the conversation past labels such as emerging, emergent, emergence, and so on. See his *Church in the Inventive Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). This is also why Andrew Jones's infamous blog post at the end of 2009 declaring the death of the emergent church missed the mark. What Jones failed to recognize is that the impact of emergent, at least in the United States, has become so significant that it has influenced virtually all expressions of church culture and is no longer relegated to voices on the fringes of the church (for better and for worse). If Jones wishes to speak of emergent as “dead,” it is only because the critiques and observations at the forefront of the emergent conversation became much further reaching than its early visionaries ever imagined—which is a way of saying that emergent's ethos is much more alive in the church today than ever (almost through an act of *kenosis*), which is perhaps best witnessed by the widespread popularity of early emergent thinkers such as Pagitt and Brian McLaren, whose influence now extends far beyond disenfranchised North American evangelicals.

<sup>13</sup> One of the factors that reinforce this concern relates to the interest that former evangelicals have with progressive theology. On the surface level, this attraction doesn't appear to be problematic at all, especially for mainliners like me who are also drawn to progressive theology. But when you couple the appeal that progressive thought carries for former evangelicals with the eagerness that mainliners have for giving evangelical expatriates a place to explore it, all of a sudden it seems that both emergents and progressives have become a bit too comfortable settling for modern expressions of progressive Christianity. One begins to wonder if the much hoped-for “postmodern” moment in emergence Christianity seems in danger of being lost, if it ever existed at all.

Please don't misunderstand me: I think there are better and worse ways of doing theology, and I wholeheartedly believe that progressive theology is much more helpful for

people and the world than fundamentalism and hard-lined evangelicalism. Indeed, I have passionately argued that progressive theology is very good news for emergents, and I continue to believe this is the case. But there is a certain critique that radical postmodernism offers both conservatives and progressives, and when progressive theology becomes par for the course in emergence Christianity then it is easy for emergents and progressives to think they have arrived in the theological promised land a bit too quickly. This can shield mainliners from the more radical implications of postmodernism and in the process allow them to continue practicing the same theology that remains far too wedded to modernism and the problems associated with it. One of the primary reasons I was initially drawn to emergence Christianity was because I believed it offered a vision of reimagining what Christian communities—including progressive ones—might look like if they took the radical implications of postmodern theology quite seriously. I'm not sure that is the case anymore, though I still hold out hope. For an accessible look at the differences between postmodern culture, which emergence Christianity generally responds to, and postmodern theory, which is often glossed over in emergence Christianity, see Carl Raschke's *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Marie Dennis et al., *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), 55.





# 1

## Innovating with Integrity

### Exploring the Core and Innovative Edges of Postmodern Ministry

*Nadia Bolz-Weber*

I am the only one eating a burrito. Everyone else sitting in the basement of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Oakland, California, on this Wednesday night in August of 1996 is pleasant enough. But they are certainly not eating burritos. That would be just me. Yet no one seems to care. Pastor Ross Merkel begins our Adult Confirmation class with a simple prayer and then gets right into it (the “it” being Lutheran theology). It’s my third week in a row and I still can’t believe I’m spending my Wednesday evening in church. I’ve somehow gone from ten years without setting foot in a Christian church to three weeks in a row in Adult Confirmation class. That’s what happens when you fall in love.

I’m not talking about falling in love with Matthew, my Lutheran seminary student fiancé, although I’m plenty in love with him. I’m talking about the Lutheran theological and liturgical tradition. I fell in love hard and fast. See, I was raised in a sectarian and fundamentalist tradition called the Church of Christ. Not the gay-friendly liberal United Church of Christ. Nope. The Church of Christ, which can only be described as “Baptist plus.” When I left at age sixteen I did so with a vengeance and a pesky little drug and alcohol problem. Ten years later, on those Wednesday

nights of catechism and confusion, I had been clean and sober for about four years. So when Pastor Merkel said that God brings life out of death and that we are all simultaneously sinner and saint; when he said that no one is climbing the spiritual ladder up to God but that God always comes down to us; when he said that God's grace is a gift freely given, which we don't earn but merely attempt to live in response to . . . well, when he said all this, I already knew it was true. God had completely interrupted my life. I was perfectly happy killing myself until God said, "That's cute, but I have something else in mind." God picked me up from one path and put me on another. I knew everything Pastor Merkel said was true, not because I was choosing to adopt some foreign ideology as my own, but rather because I had actually *experienced* it all to be true. I had undeniably experienced God's grace and now I was hearing a historically rooted, beautiful articulation of what I had experienced in my life, all in the form of Lutheran theology.

It changed everything. At the same time I was in the Adult Confirmation class at St. Paul I was also attending liturgy every week, which was equally as unexplainable. I had never in my life experienced liturgy and it felt like a mysterious and ancient gift handed down from generations of the faithful. It washed over me. I kept thinking, "I want to go back and do those things and say those things again," but I had no idea why.

That's how I fell in love with Lutheranism; and then the Lutheran Church kind of fell in love with me. I was soon asked to take part in several roundtable discussions and to serve on various planning teams. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) offices in Chicago kept asking me to fly out and talk to them. I became a Lutheran evangelist to these "cradle" Lutherans who had no idea what they were sitting on. But soon I felt an urge to just be an evangelist to my own people because as much as I loved the Lutheran Church, I'd sit on the church pew and look around and think, "No one here looks like me." My friends are not going to ELCA churches. And not because the Lutheran Church is doing something wrong. It's just that in order for my friends to go to a Lutheran church they have to culturally commute from who they are to who the church is and they just aren't gonna make the trip. I just happen to be native to a very particular cultural context: I'm an urban young(ish) adult who is heavily tattooed, a bit cynical, overeducated, kind of artsy-fartsy, and socially progressive. My friends aren't going to show up to a nicey-nice Lutheran church with the friendly chitchat and the pews in a row and the organ music and the awkward formality. Again, there is nothing wrong with traditional church. It's often a faithful and genuine expression of living out the gospel; it's just not an expression that's either native to or conversant with my particular context.

It's a longer story than can fit here, but in the end I felt called to be a pastor to my people. I suspected that if the Lutheran theological and liturgical tradition was deeply meaningful for me then it might, just might, be deeply meaningful for my friends and the other folks in my cultural context.

So while in seminary I started a Lutheran emerging church called House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS). The term “emerging church” is of course problematic as it is applied broadly to things that are actually antithetical to each other. So when I use the term I like to define it first (which isn’t very postmodern of me . . . to actually presume to define a term, but here goes): *Emerging churches are Christian communities that (ironically) emerge out of a very particular cultural context in which the traditional church is largely irrelevant. That context is more often than not urban, young, and postmodern.*

From this perspective, HFASS is nothing more than a Lutheran church that emerged out of the young postmodern context of urban Denver. Many are surprised to learn that we adhere quite closely to the Lutheran liturgy. We are more liturgical than most Lutheran churches I visit as our liturgies include Eucharist, the Kyrie, a chanted psalm, gospel acclamation, Sanctus, and so on. In other words, unlike some Lutheran churches, we haven’t jettisoned the liturgy in order to be “relevant”—rather, we’ve dived deeply into it thinking it might hold some wisdom beyond fleeting relevance. Here’s how we describe ourselves: “We are a group of folks figuring out how to be a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice oriented, queer inclusive, incarnational, contemplative, irreverent, ancient-future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination.” At least that’s what our website says.

In many ways we are like any other church. In many ways we are not. The demographic of the church looks a bit different, as 85 percent of the community members are single young adults between the ages of twenty-two and forty-two; so we are a church filled with the kind of people who don’t go to church. And there are particularities to that population, which inform the ethos of the community. For instance, postmodern young adults are not as concerned with there being a clear line between reverence and irreverence. There is a humor to our church, which is quite organic and joyful to us, but could be offensive to people from a different cultural context. For example, the logo for HFASS looks like a piece of parchment with a nail in the top, à la Luther’s Ninety-five Theses. Our church shirts have this parchment and nail logo on the front, and the back says “radical Protestants; nailing sh\*t to the church door since 1517.” Had our roots not been critically important to us we never would have bothered to have a logo that harkens back over five hundred years. We believe that we must be deeply rooted in tradition in order to innovate with integrity. So the logo expresses our Lutheran roots while simultaneously affirming that we are reforming that very tradition and also not taking ourselves too seriously in the process. While a more modernist sensibility delineates a clear line between reverence and irreverence, a more postmodern sensibility tends to meld the sacred and profane, the serious and silly. I once heard Tony Jones say that he sees various emerging churches sharing only one thing: a sense of irony.

The use of humor at HFASS illuminates how culturally distinct post-modern churches are from our modern predecessors. Our humor is an important identity marker—expressing our freedom to be the church in ways that make sense to us rather than having to adhere to patterns of behavior determined outside the cultural context in which we live. North American denominationalism has established certain ways of being (dressy church attire, “niceness,” formality, Sunday-morning worship time, clergy who are slightly removed and distinctly more pious than their parishioners, organ music), which have perhaps emerged out of a particular cultural context and are now no longer seen as culturally located, but as normative. We have conflated a cultural expression of church with church itself so that any deviation from this norm is seen as, well, a deviation and not simply another of many cultural expressions. This dynamic reminds me of the words “under God” in the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance. These words were not added to the pledge until the early 1950s as a way of asserting the identity of the United States (in opposition to communist nations, which were decidedly not “under God”). Yet even though the phrase was not in the original pledge, and even though the reason for adding the phrase was located in a certain time and cultural ethos of our country and served a function within that context, now, half a century later when asserting our noncommunist identity is no longer necessary, the Pledge of Allegiance is just not the Pledge of Allegiance without it. In other words, something that was added for a particular reason at a particular time is now broadly considered an integral part of the pledge.

One of the most important functions that hyphenated churches (communities like HFASS, which are both denominational and emerging) play in the life of denominations is to illuminate what is central and what is peripheral. Or, as Luther said, what is critical and what is *adiaphora*. By taking the essential practices and theology of the church and dressing them in the native clothing of cultural contexts in which the traditional expressions have been irrelevant, these hyphenated communities not only live out the gospel in their settings but also reinvigorate the denomination by reintroducing them to the possibilities within their own religious tradition.

As an example, HFASS celebrates the Triduum during Holy Week (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and a full Easter Vigil). It takes the entire community to pull this off and when the vigil is over and we have come to the resurrection, we have a big dance party—complete with a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font. Because, let’s face it, nothing says, “He is risen!” like a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font. I recognize that in many contexts this would be seen as deeply irreverent, even disrespectful. But for us it is delightful. Part of my job as the church planter is to help form the theological identity of the community. Ideally speaking, that identity should be deeply rooted in my theological tradition while simultaneously being informed by the cultural context of the community itself. Herein lies

the beauty and importance of denominational emerging churches: the symbiotic relationship in the church between the core and the innovative edge.

I receive countless e-mails from people all across the country—as well as those living in the United Kingdom—who want to express their gratitude for HFASS and how they are inspired by something we have done. (It never fails to feel slightly ironic that people seem to be so inspired by us, seeing that the reality of HFASS often feels wobbly, uncertain, and sometimes deeply frustrating from the inside of things.) During Advent of 2008 we undertook creating an Advent icon (the icon on the cover of this book—Mary with her arms raised, the Christ child still within her). We created this piece of art over the four weeks of Advent during our liturgies . . . but we made it entirely out of Christmas advertising. Since that time, half a dozen churches have sent us photos of their own projects inspired by ours. We also have several “signature events” out in the community, including the Blessing of the Bicycles. It’s hard to say how many churches have written us asking if they can use our prayers for their own Blessing of the Bicycles. The ELCA publisher, Augsburg Fortress, has even bought the rights to these prayers and will be publishing them as a resource on their website.

The point is this: Both the idea for the icon and the idea for the Blessing of the Bicycles came from the freedom we have to try crazy stuff. This freedom is a result of being safely tethered to the big ship of the Lutheran Church while having lots of room to play. If we had to make sure that everything we undertook as a community would be understandable and inoffensive to folks from a traditional church, then we would never create things that speak to us and those in our own cultural setting. The irony (and perhaps the beauty) is that, at least for HFASS, the freedom we have to explore and play in the tradition has actually produced many things that people in other settings have found useful, if not inspirational.

If we visualize the Lutheran Church (or any other tradition) as consisting of both the core and the innovative edge, then we can see how needed a mixed economy of church can be for the vitality and survival of the tradition. The core holds the history, the tradition, and the money. It includes the ecclesial structures, the traditional churches that have existed for generations and are dying off, the newer and livelier suburban churches, the seminaries and colleges, and the parachurch organizations. The midsection would be composed of youth, campus, and outdoor ministries—any ministry consisting mostly of younger people. The innovative edges then are emerging churches, multicultural ministries, and any ministry being established outside of the structure of the ELCA, especially by seminarians and laity in response to their context. These edges take the skeleton of the tradition and en flesh it in distinct cultural settings, whether it be immigrant Indonesians or urban punks. The only way for the edges to survive is with the liturgical, theological, and financial resources of the core. The core, in turn, needs the life that is brought back to it from the edges in order to not

atrophy. A healthy ecclesial life is a symbiotic system where each sector fills a role and is needed by the other. A simple example is this: HFASS is a community of around fifty-five people who, at the time of this writing, have been worshiping weekly for seventeen months. In that time we have sent three young adults to seminary. In seven years, Church of the Apostles, a Lutheran and Episcopalian emerging church in Seattle, has sent just under thirty young adults to seminary. Will Church of the Apostles or HFASS ever be “totally self-supporting”? Maybe, maybe not. But the ELCA must look at what function these communities play in the whole ecosystem of the ELCA and determine on that basis if they are worth supporting long term. Over the course of seventeen months, HFASS has had five short-term seminary interns, as well as an Anglican intern from the United Kingdom, and we have had to turn down many, many other requests for learning opportunities from seminarians.

The point being that these communities and the ways in which they are living out the gospel is compelling to many people who are looking for where the church is going to be ten, twenty-five, and fifty years from now. My concern for the mainline is that the church doesn't seem to be taking the cultural crevasse between the generations very seriously. The unprecedented rate of technological change in fifteen years has created not a generational gap, but a cultural one. We should pay close attention to the kind of cultural orientation that extends beyond generational boundaries, meaning that someone can think and act like a Baby Boomer and be twenty years old and, conversely, someone can think and act like a Millennial and be fifty years old. According to the Pew Research Center, Millennials are the least likely of any generation before them to care about organized religion, yet they also pray as much as their grandparents did.<sup>1</sup> The truth of the matter is that the institutional church is simply irrelevant to them. Millennials see institutional religion as being quite separate from spirituality and as a result they stay away. As our denominations look back in anger at the image of their heyday in the 1950s and 1960s getting smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror, they have failed to look out the front window. The 1950s are never coming back. The question is not *How do we recapture our past success?* but *What does it look like to be followers of Christ in the here and now? What does it look like to be Christ's body in the future?* Earnest people who love the church and see nothing but it dying all around them often pose to me the first question. As much as I wish I could say otherwise, I simply don't know how to revive the dying church. I don't know what can be done for the countless little churches filled only with older folks: churches that live in a demographic reality that when projected out ten to fifteen years looks grim. These churches are faithful expressions of the gospel, but they are going the way of the dinosaur. So what next? The death of Lutheranism and Methodism and Episcopalianism, and so on? I hope not.

I'm not a cheerleader for postdenominationalism. I don't think our traditions are dying. Perhaps a particular cultural expression of our traditions is dying, but that is a very different thing from saying our traditions are dying. Our traditions have curated parts of the Christian story—including theological viewpoints and liturgical practices—that are like family treasures. The Anabaptists have curated the peace church tradition for us; the Methodists have curated the social gospel tradition for us; the Lutherans and Episcopalians have curated the ancient liturgy for us. These are gifts cherished and lived out by generations of the faithful for the benefit of the whole body of Christ, and they remain incredibly valuable to us. They help us innovate with integrity and become caretakers as well. We would do well to recall Jaroslav Pelikan's distinction between "tradition" and "traditionalism": Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.<sup>2</sup> So if we are looking to the future of our denominations, let's not try to relive traditionalisms that worked in the past. Instead, let's be innovative with the traditions that have been passed down to us and consider ways we might be caretakers of them in culturally appropriate ways.

Perhaps the best people to be in conversation with about the future of the church are those of us who are native to Millennial culture and are living out our particular traditions in that context. What is the future of the mainline? I'm not sure. But I think we should be asking the kind of people I am about to introduce you to. They represent communities doing Lutheran Word and Sacrament ministry in nontraditional settings. They are living this Lutheran tradition out by enfleshing it in new places and with new people.

Jodi Houge started Humble Walk Lutheran Church while still in seminary. She describes it this way:

Humble Walk sprung up in the alleys and yards of this working-class urban St. Paul neighborhood. During my final year at seminary, I invited neighbors and friends to gather for a simple worship at a local coffee shop on Sunday evenings. People showed up—hungry for community and looking for a different way to experience church together. Our neighborhood is teeming with young families, twenty-somethings and first-time home buyers. The Humble Walk community reflects this demographic—most Sundays, half of our worshipers are under the age of seven.

After four months in the coffee shop, we moved to a storefront. We travel lightly as a community—renting space at that storefront for three hours on Sunday evenings. (We own four plastic containers: one for clean dishes, one for dirty, one for worship supplies, and one for toys.) Humble Walk eats well together and often—we have a potluck every single Sunday after worship. Without office space or owning a building, we are forced into public space for every meeting, event, and gathering. We like it this way. We are



very intentional about using our local bars, parks, coffee shops, and yards to be present in this corner of the world. Humble Walk is old-fashioned church (order of worship, plenty of coffee, Word and Sacrament)—and deeply incarnational. Christ is present.<sup>3</sup>

Ryan Marsh is a lay mission developer at Church of the Beloved in Edmonds, Washington, and an adult convert to Lutheranism. After four years of working with Church of the Apostles in Seattle, four partnering ELCA churches north of Seattle called him to explore starting an “out-reach to missing generations.” He’s currently on the slow train to ordination through a distance learning process at Wartburg Seminary. Ryan has a “why not” approach to life and ministry. He describes Church of the Beloved this way:

Church of the Beloved is a four-year-old mission start of the ELCA in Edmonds, Washington. We are made up of many intersecting circles—a worshipping community, a residential Christian community, a community garden, a gaggle of artists, a steady flow of interns, and more young families than we know what to do with right now. It seems like too much to hold together, yet the Gospel of Jesus somehow creates a strong enough thread to drive this beautiful mess. A 105-year-old mansion is the hub for our mission together in Edmonds and it’s where we offer classes, concerts, parties, readings, an organic P-Patch, rooms for residing, and other ways of offering the gifts of God’s church to our neighborhood. What we do isn’t particularly fresh; in fact, it seems pretty ancient, but because the Spirit is doing it now, with us, and in the language of zip code 98026 we have to suspect that God is up to something new . . . again.<sup>4</sup>

Young African American men started Shekinah Chapel in Chicago over fifteen years ago. Yeheil Curry, their second pastor, describes how he came to lead the community and what the church is like now:

Shekinah Chapel is a worshipping community that grew from 30 to 300 members under the leadership of Sean McMillian from 1995–2005. I joined in 1997 when there was about thirty of us. Sean was never ordained by the ELCA, but was very gifted and talented. When he stepped down in 2005, thirty members got together and approached me and asked if I would consider leading. The Synod preferred that an ordained pastor be assigned temporarily, but the Shekinah Chapel leadership resisted and I was granted permission to lead provided that I help move Shekinah Chapel towards becoming an officially organized congregation of the ELCA. From 2005–2009 I led Shekinah Chapel as a lay leader. I was ordained in



April of 2009 and we are now considered an ELCA congregation under development.

Service at Shekinah sometimes includes an element in the liturgy referred to as Libations; a ritual dating back several centuries to the African continent. It is a time when we acknowledge the ancestors—those recently departed and those among us. While only a small portion of the liturgy, this meaningful ritual affirms the importance of the culture that this generation has been separated from. The youth ministry of the church hosts a quarterly interfaith “Holy Hip-Hop” service where they, along with youth groups from several other congregations, fellowship and support each other via praise dance, rap, song, poetry, mime, and the preached Word.

Shekinah Chapel deeply focuses on community service, the arts, and mentoring as a way of living out their mission to “Bring them in, Train them up, and Ship them out.”<sup>5</sup>

Emily Scott wanted to create a place where God and God’s people sit down and have dinner. Trained as a liturgist and musician, Emily graduated from Yale Divinity School and the Institute of Sacred Music, where she earned her Master of Divinity degree. She started St. Lydia’s Table in 2009 as a member of the laity and is now in the candidacy process for ordination in the ELCA. She describes St. Lydia’s Table this way:

St. Lydia’s is a Dinner Church in New York City. We gather each Sunday evening in East Village to share a sacred meal, just as the first followers of Jesus did. We are building St. Lydia’s together through leadership that draws on the community to support and care for one another. Our liturgy reflects and supports our mission of nourishing and feeding one another at a holy table.

Our life as a community revolves around three central pillars:

1. Telling Our Story: we gather to proclaim the story of Christ’s resurrection, and through it, the daily dyings and risings that comprise the life of faith.
2. Sharing the Meal: we gather to share a sacred meal, blessed as sacred with an ancient Eucharistic prayer.
3. Working Together: we gather to cook, set up, and clean, knowing that working alongside one another draws us closer to God and binds us together as the church.<sup>6</sup>

Kae Evensen and Mark Stenberg are copastors at Mercy Seat in Minneapolis, which they describe this way:

Mercy Seat is a startup church in the urban core of Minneapolis trying to uphold the deepest and most lovely task of the Church: that is, preaching the living Christ. By most parameters, we could

be considered an emergent church, but we don't use that language and we don't fit neatly into any one category. We find our grounding in the ancient liturgies of the Church, renewing them from within, shaping ourselves around Word and Sacrament ministry, our hope staked to the crucified and risen Christ. Can we help it if we dress sort of funny and we happen to be bookish, artsy, and at times a little goofy?

As much as we have in common with those who came before us, we cannot deny the fact that our cultural context has changed considerably over the past fifty years. That means how we speak the message of death and new life has to be framed with new language, and the best of our traditions need to be presented in ways that can be heard. We cannot assume that because we're practicing these traditions within a different context than those who have come before us we are doing it better; we are all simply pointing, like John the Baptist, to the One who loves and graces us all.<sup>7</sup>

While gathering these stories of other Lutheran Word and Sacrament communities on the edges of my denomination I soon realized two things:

1. Out of the seven leaders listed (including me), only two were raised in the Lutheran tradition.
2. Four of the seven of us were not yet ordained when we started our churches.

While new communities with emerging sensibilities within denominational structures cannot be looked to for the answers to all that ails the mainline, they can be seen as signs of hope and new life. When we can identify leaders in our midst who are native to the millennial cultural context, a context that will only take up an increasingly larger space within the cultural landscape of the United States, we can then ask them, *What does it look like to be the church now and in the future?* They have the authority to address this question. The Lutheran tradition is nimble and simply should not be *limited* to an ethnically Northern European, culturally Midwestern expression. Perhaps the future of our traditions lies in the leadership of those who have yet to even darken the doors, those who are still in middle school, those who are passionate about the gospel and are living it out beyond the denominational structures and gate-keeping and systems of approval. The history of Christianity's spread has always been connected to a story that travels: in other words, the parts of the tradition that can be imported into and informed by any cultural context. So let's pay attention to where the Spirit is mischievously breathing anew in places anew. And let's agree to be surprised . . . and hopeful.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Religion Among the Millennials,” <http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Learn more at <http://www.humblewalkchurch.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Learn more at <http://www.belovedschurch.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Learn more at <http://www.shekinahchapel.web.officelive.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Learn more at <http://www.stlydias.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Learn more at <http://www.nemercy.org>.