

St Andrew's on The Terrace 6 May 2018 Easter 6 Emerging Church 3 Who? Renewing the Apostolate

Readings for the Gathering The Epistle

Acts 10:44-48

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

The Gospel

John 15:9-13

⁹ "As God has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept God's commands and remain in God's love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Contemporary reading Beyond Business-as-Usual Christianity Interview with Brian McLaren.

Who would be a typical member of the "emerging church"?

Could I give you two typical kinds? A significant proportion would be people who grew up in traditional churches but now feel they don't fit there anymore. If they don't feel that they can function in the churches of their upbringing, the emerging church provides a good alternative to leaving the faith entirely. But increasing numbers of people involved have very little or no religious background. They are searching for God, for meaning, for purpose. If they were to attend a traditional church, they would find so many obstacles in their way before they could even hear what the Christian message was. In many of these [emerging] churches, some of those obstacles are removed so they have a chance to evaluate the Christian message.

What would be some obstacles of the traditional church?

A lot of traditional churches in the United States are caught up in the culture wars. When many people encounter the religious right, what they sense from these people is anger, judgment, a kind of rejection and combative attitude. People look at our world and say, 'I don't want to be part of a religion that is combative and judgmental and angry...Jesus doesn't seem that way.' Most of the obstacles are a matter of tone and attitude. I think a lot of people are asking, 'How did the Christian faith come to be associated with something that is pro-war and sort of anti-poor and pro-judgment?' Those things don't seem to match with the teachings of Jesus...

How would you suggest that the church work in a postmodern world?

A good start would be for us to talk less about being Christians and more about being followers of Jesus. If we were to actually live the way Jesus taught us to live, it would humble us. We can be very proud if we understand the right doctrines and have certain opinions. But when we deal with the very nitty-gritty of living the way Jesus taught us, none of us can act very proud. We would start taking seriously the things Jesus said about caring for the poor. If we see our neighbour in need, we go and do what we can to help. The most important thing is that we stop being content as members of the Christian religion and actually aspire to start living in the way of Jesus

Reflection for the Gathering

In this series we're looking at how the new emerges after a significant death The disciples needed to regroup when Jesus died. Almost 2000 years later, we need to regroup after the death of Christendom.

For those of you unfamiliar with the term, Christendom is where Christianity and government or state have become merged and Christianity is the dominant force within society. For western society this is no longer true, shown by declining conventional churches and increases in those registering as having 'no religion'. Wikipedia's gathered these definitions:

Canadian theology professor [Douglas John Hall](#) stated (1997) that "Christendom" [...] means literally the dominion or sovereignty of the Christian religion."^[3] [Thomas John Curry](#), Roman Catholic auxiliary bishop of [Los Angeles](#), defined (2001) Christendom as "the system dating from the fourth century by which governments upheld and promoted Christianity."^[8] Curry states that the end of Christendom came about because modern governments refused to "uphold the teachings, customs, ethos, and practice of Christianity."^[8] British [church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch](#) described (2010) Christendom as "the union between Christianity and secular power."^[9]

When I talk about the death of Christendom I'm not talking about the death of Christianity; but the death of a particular relationship between the state and Christian religion, where Christian organisations are privileged and protected.

Sometimes our governments still uphold teaching, customs, ethos and practice of Christianity and sometimes not. Church still get a break over rates under most local government, Bible in Schools is still supported by a national legal adaptation of the school day, and on Good Friday mainstream shops still are to close. That these three examples of Christendom are periodically disputed by in our society is a sign that Christendom is no longer a universal reality.

It is not only that governmental support might be waning, it is also that, alongside, popular support for organised Christian religion is waning. There are other things to do on Sundays and the second and third and fourth opinions widely available on theology mean popular culture supports organised Christianity less and less. So Christendom – both Christianity supported by the state but also Christianity supported by popular culture – is, if not dead, at least terminally ill.

How then are we to be Christian? We've looked at the need for the church to shrug off the traditional ossified carapace of the past so new growth can happen. We have looked at one trend within the new emerging growth - neo monasticism where participants in faith communities pick up a new lifestyle instead of subscribing to prescribed propositions.

This week we look at how the kind of people which make up this church emerging from the ruins of Christendom. The people pictured on the front of the order of service are the moot community in the City of London. They've repopulated a neo-Gothic Christopher Wren-designed church with the support of the Anglican Bishop of London. They have developed their own Rhythm of Life to which members are invited to commit. This picture is a recent annual commitment service. All those present, in some way, have committed to a different level within this neo monastic community. We see what they physically look like – what characteristics might we find within them and other similar groups?

Like the disciples, emerging churches are finding the new life springing up within them attracts people different from those who were here before. Look at today's passage from Acts. Don't you love the patent shock felt by Jewish disciples of Jesus that Gentiles, (non-jews) were attracted by Peter's stirring Pentecost sermon. Remember?

⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

It's like a church where I was minister some years ago holding the patent belief that gay people would arrive in pairs. They didn't recognise a single lesbian woman as belonging to the gay community because the usual sign (a partner) wasn't there.

As Brian McLaren says, people in emerging churches may not have a long life of Sunday school and youth group behind them. They may have come in 'fresh', unaware of the biblical literature, not

knowing the stories or customs others know well. The early church immediately-post-Jesus had to grapple with whether Gentile Christians should be circumcised or not – that was a hard debate. I often wonder “as long as people get the message of unconditional welcome, does it matter if they know we got that idea from the story of the lost son and the prodigal father or not?” Probably not, though knowing the story adds richness to the concept.

So the people in emerging churches may be different. They also, in the main, take a different approach to those of us who joined the church in the modern era. Then, knowing facts and knowledge was important. Agreeing to propositions and doctrines was necessary. Belief and historical truth were paramount. In the more fluid postmodern era, fixing on a navigational point like Jesus and tacking our way through the waves which life throws up at us is more the style of travel – trusting the journey, taking one step and then another and another even when you are not completely sure yet of your destination; you only know your companion is trustworthy. The key word is trust, not the rigid belief required in the past.

That brings me to a third characteristic. In Christendom-style Christianity often there was a transfer of personal responsibility and agency. Sometimes the church carried the mystery for its congregations in a way which impoverished their members. They simply sat and watched the spiritual drama unfold before them like an audience at a passion play. They observed the birth of this spectacular child at advent, they watched his growth, they lined the bank of the Jordan at his baptism and watched drone-like from above as he endures the wilderness. They are in the crowd while he teaches and are spectators in the crowd at his death. The spiritual transformations within the narrative all happen outside, over there, externally.

In contrast the fluidity and freedom and yet the accountability of the most vital emerging churches enable their members and followers to *participate* in the mystery. The new birth happens with *them*, the baptismal moment in the Jordan is *their* recognition of being at one with the divine, the wilderness is their *own* place of trial, and many times *we* must die again and again to that which impedes and restrains us. Then too, we rise to new life as *we* embrace enlightenment and we too are transformed time and time again and not only at Easter.

And fourth: both trusting the journey and allowing ourselves to be transformed leads to an *active* faith. One of St Andrew’s pillars is Faith in Action. In a vital emerging church this ‘action’ is not what we do when we have thrown out conventional theology and turn to social praxis to fill the void. It is social action born out of our own experiences of trusting the mystery, walking in the darkness and practising courage in committing to the journey. It is active work *consistent with* the inner transformations happening inside us.

So, on the front of the order of service is one of the posters for the Fairtrade Challenge which is timed for next week, May 11-13. Emerging church members tend to get on with social action. They *do* it rather than have a committee meeting. The suggestion this year that we pick the number 4 from the middle of the slogan “stand4fairness” and embody it in ourselves next Sunday is an example of the *being in* what we do, not organising something out *there*, away from us. Here at St Andrew’s, for example, we believe in fairness AND we have committed to being a Fairtrade church, putting our Fairtrade coffee where our mouth is, so to speak.

A fifth characteristic of an emerging church person is accountability: Sometimes when tired of old structures, we simply yearn for freedom. We want to shed the old strictures we endured as children. Shrugging off the carapace is immensely enticing. But in vital emerging church, followers, novitiates, apprentices, participants, whatever they are called, voluntarily embrace accountability to the community.

They know a community is only as vital as its individual members are. If people are spiritually lazy or cynical, then the community will turn lazy and cynical too. If individuals are pursuing their own

journeys with intention and commitment, then the community will pick up that transformative energy which results in such commitment. So, in the neo monastic communities we heard about 3 weeks ago, they have borrowed some of the ideas of the ancient monastic practice of stages on the journey as a community member. One is first a follower, then a participant, or first a friend and then a companion, or first an apprentice and then a member.

There are inherent in many of the Rhythms of Life, promises to be accountable to the community. Also, the joining member commits, in many cases, to looking after their own self-awareness and developing consciousness. This is to prevent the community being derailed by people's unacknowledged baggage with skews community decision-making with hidden agendas. I was intrigued to notice that at one stage part of the discipleship training the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC required was in "Difficult conversations" – a recognition that frankness and honesty were skills everyone needed to learn. This shows an intentionality and accountability in any vital emerging church. Vigilance is needed to maintain this directness and mutual accountability.

The emerging church therefore seems to first, attract different people; second where it is vital, it encourages a directness of spirituality, third, it prizes trust above belief fourth, it expects action-oriented spirituality and fifth mutual accountability,

To maintain such a fresh approach, the merging church also needs to be prepared to discern when changes are necessary, not hold on to customs simply because 'we have always done it that way.'

What is it McLaren says? "The most important thing is that we stop being content as members of the Christian religion and actually aspire to start living in the way of Jesus."

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