

2006

# The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month  
by Phillip Bennett



## The emerging church conversation

In October 2005, my wife, Irene, and I used part of my four-week sabbatical after 20 years of ministry to learn more about the emerging church, a concept that began in the late 1990s among some younger church leaders and is now taking place globally. While some outsiders call it a “movement,” insiders call it a “conversation.”

Irene and I visited three emerging churches in Virginia, Maryland and Minnesota. We also attended a three-day conference, “A Generous Orthodoxy.” In each place we were two of the oldest, if not the oldest, persons present. (Usually we were 25 years older than most participants.) We also read a number of books written by leaders in this conversation. I want to share with you what we learned about the emerging church from our study and visits.

### Characteristics

- There is no particular model. It is more a mindset having different and creative expressions varying according to cultural context, local tradition and the thinking of a particular church’s leader.
- Semantics matter, such as the preference for worship “gathering” rather than worship “service.” Service refers to music and preaching offered to attendees rather than what the people bring to God. “Gathering” emphasizes that when the church gathers it is to worship God.
- Leadership is more decentralized and entrepreneurial with less congregational control. A real leveling of the field between clergy and laypersons exists.
- Organizational simplicity is held dear. A common expression is “not buildings, budgets and bodies, but conversation, connection and collaboration.”
- Emphasis is on building the Kingdom of

God, not personal salvation; on converting people to become followers of Jesus who are “partners” in mission and ministry, not on helping them become “members” of a church. Instead of preoccupation with the soul after death, people are invited into a personal relationship with God that will not be private.

- The local community is to be a missional community. Mission-mindedness, an ecumenical commitment and a high value for social justice are present.
- On the surface the conversation appears to be one of style. Underneath it, however, is a crucial theological and ethical paradigm shift.

### Worship experiences

- Gatherings usually occur on Sunday between 9:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m.
- Worship is holistic or eclectic in expression.
- Experiences last more than 60 minutes, with most 90 minutes or more.
- The music is new, sometimes written by local musicians. Some old hymn texts with new tunes are used, but mostly newer texts dominate.
- All kinds of media — computerized visuals of text, art, pictures, videos — are used throughout the worship time.
- Everyone dresses informally.
- Worshipers have many opportunities to connect.
- Many announcements are made about doing ministry or mission in the community and around the world, but almost none are about meetings.
- Communion is a part of every worship gathering. Attendees serve themselves or laypersons serve them at small tables placed around the room.
- No offerings are taken. However, “offering

### Recommended Reading

- Gibbs, Eddie and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. Baker Academic, 2005.
- Kimball, Dan. *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. Zondervan, 2003.
- McLaren, Brian D. *A New Kind of Christian*. Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- McLaren, Brian D. *The Story We Find Ourselves In*. Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- McLaren, Brian D. *The Last Word and the Word After That*. Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- McLaren, Brian D. *A Generous Orthodoxy*. Zondervan, 2004.
- Miller, Donald. *Blue Like Jazz*. Thomas Nelson, 2003.
- Wallis, Jim. *God’s Politics*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

### On the Web

- <http://www.off-the-map.org/>  
<http://www.emergentvillage.com/>  
<http://www.vintagefaith.com/>  
<http://www.theooze.com/>

boxes” and information on direct deposits are available at the front or rear of the building.

- Pastors lead the “teaching-preaching” segments, and associate ministers or laypersons conduct the other parts of the worship experiences, including communion.
- Worship leaders demonstrate real sensitivity to post-modernity by giving clear instructions and regular explanations (for example, about religious symbols, liturgy, prayer times, use of Scripture and readings) to help seekers and guests understand what is taking place and why. **BT**

**THE RESOURCE PAGE** is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month’s page was written by Phillip Bennett, minister of education at First Baptist Church, Augusta, Ga.