

## *Emergent Village & Full Communion*

By Dwight J. Friesen

### Toward an Understanding of Emergent Village

“Emergent Village is a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Emergent Village began as a group of friends gathering under the auspices and generosity of Leadership Network<sup>2</sup> in the late 1990s and by 2001 had formed the organization known now as Emergent Village. We formed our organization as a means of inviting more people into our imaginative conversation which was helping us critically revision what it might look like to follow Christ in our increasingly globalized, post-Christendom, post-denominational and post-modern cultural context(s). Around 2005 we began distancing ourselves from the term “Emergent Church” (although that language is still often applied), we did this because our emphasis is not on the church as much as it is living into the Kingdom of God. Part of our hope in the name, “Emergent Village” is to reinforce an understanding that churches are localized, indigenous manifestations of Christological communities seeking to realize the reign of God, in specific times, places, and narratives.<sup>3</sup>

Though we began meeting because many of us were growing disillusioned and disenfranchised by the conventional ecclesial institutions of the late 20th century, our experiences and hopes for the present/future Kingdom of God compelled us to lean into our ecclesial concerns. The more we gathered in conversation, the more we discovered others who held similar dreams for their lives, their communities of faith and for the

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.org/>, accessed 3/5/2007. This paper will draw significantly from the EV’s web content.

<sup>2</sup> Leadership Network describes itself on its website saying, “Leadership Network has fostered church innovation and growth through strategies, programs, tools and resources that are consistent with our far-reaching mission: to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact.” [http://www.leadnet.org/about\\_OurMission.asp](http://www.leadnet.org/about_OurMission.asp), accessed 3/5/2007.

<sup>3</sup> For a thoughtful study of characteristics of emergent churches see, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

world. Along with Emergent Village, the avant-church<sup>4</sup> – a broader “emerging church movement” including a variety of renewal movements, simple church movements, neo-monastic groups, and intentional Christian communities – has been growing and we in Emergent Village are endeavoring to resource the theological imaginations and holistic-spiritual lives of all those who consider themselves a part of this broader movement. Emergent Village is varied, dynamic, and relational thus no one person, board or committee can authoritatively speak for us; we are striving remain egalitarian and amorphous. Even writing this brief paper on behalf of Emergent Village feels somewhat inconsistent with our “flat organizational” values, for truly there cannot be one Emergent Village perspective on Full Communion.

As you may be sensing, Emergent Village appears to have a unique role in the Faith & Order Commission as we are neither a church nor a denomination. Emergent Village is a type of ecumenical movement of Christian churches from various ecclesial non/traditions, parachurch organizations, and Christian social-advocates linked together in a generative conversational network around mission. In our linking together we simultaneously honor the unique faith traditions of one another without letting those differences be impediments to our interpersonal connections, and missional collaborations. In fact, many (if not most) members of our conversations coming from more historic traditions value their tradition in what may be described as a post-denominational manner.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> By “avant-church” I am referring to the cluster of daring ecclesial expressions exploring what it means to faithfully follow Christ in the new paradigm. The term avant-garde has historically been used to describe movements of experimentation with “new” concepts in politics and art. The term was first used by Napoleon’s army to describe an elite force who stealthily would get behind enemy lines to gather information to better prepare the rest of the army for encountering their enemy.

<sup>5</sup> By “Post-denominational” I am suggesting that many in our conversations see themselves as narratively and culturally linked to a tradition while quick to deconstruct their respective traditions’ reified structures, hierarchies and power dynamics. Thus, the commitments to remain connected to their traditions often appear to be more out of a need for personal/communal narrative integrity, cultural identity, ecclesial accountability and pragmatic ministry support, rather than an abiding commitment to the tradition for the sake of the tradition. We also find that these same people have a passion for the narrative histories of their respective traditions and love to tell the stories of the emerging leaders of their traditions.

Although there are many different faith communities linked together making up Emergent Village, it is our interpersonal network which drives our growth. In fact Emergent Village's primary concern is not that organizations share fellowship with other organizations as much as our concern is that people connect with people. "Full communion" for us, is not experienced at an institutional level as much as at an interpersonal level. It is not only clergy and leadership who are participating in Emergent Village life, but anyone (professional clergy or lay person) who self-identifies with the parameters of the village conversations. Our hope is to experience and encourage transformation (personal, ecclesial and cultural) through encounter with the "other," therefore, we diligently resist self-definition in propositional terms which tend to exclude. Instead we seek to embody a differentiating curiosity in which our truth claims are submitted to one another as conversation starters.<sup>6</sup>

Because we emphasize that we are a generative conversation of friends self-identifying with the parameters of Emergent Village conversations it seems wise to articulate the practices and values make up these conversational parameters.

### Practices and Values of Emergent Village

Our website states, "We believe in God, beauty, future, and hope – but you won't find a traditional statement of faith or dogmatic truth claims coming from Emergent Village per se."<sup>7</sup> We are committed to a "generous orthodoxy"<sup>8</sup> in faith and practice – affirming the historic Christian faith as interpreted within the rule of faith and Christ's injunction to love one another . . . even when we disagree. Typically, we value humility more than correctness, hospitality more than being set apart, curiosity more than

---

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller treatment of EV theologies see, "A Hopeful Way Forward: Theology of Practice, Practice of Theology." Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, editors, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 171-244.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.org/about-information/faqs>, accessed 3/13/2007.

<sup>8</sup> Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

tradition; in fact theological agreement is not a primary goal for us, we expect to disagree and do frequently.<sup>9</sup>

Having said all this, most members of Emergent Village hold in common four values,<sup>10</sup> which, in the language of a religious order, we call our “order and rule”:

1. Commitment to God in the Way of Jesus: By this we mean we are committed to doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. In the words of Jesus, we seek to live by the Great Commandment: loving God and loving our neighbors – including those who might be considered “the least of these” or enemies. We understand the gospel to be centered in Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God, a message of reconciliation with God, humanity, creation, and within oneself (as a social being).
2. Commitment to the Church in all its Forms: We are committed to honoring and serving the church in all its forms – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Anabaptist and new forms still being birthed – rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others, we see that every form of the church has both weaknesses and strengths, both liabilities and potential.

We believe the rampant injustice and sin in our world is an invitation for the sincere, collaborative, and whole-hearted response of all Christ-followers in all denominations, from the most historic and hierarchical, through the mid-range of local and congregational churches, to the most spontaneous and informal expressions. We affirm both the value of strengthening, renewing, and transitioning existing churches and organizations, and the need for planting, resourcing, and coaching new church expressions of many kinds.

---

<sup>9</sup> For a glimpse into some of the differences and disagreements within our conversation see Robert E. Webber, editor, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> For more details on the practices that flow from these values site the EV site. <http://www.emergentvillage.org/about-information/values-and-practices>, last accessed 3/13/2007.

We seek to be irenic and inclusive of all our Christian sisters and brothers, rather than elitist and critical. We own the many failures of the church as our failures, which humble us and calls us to repentance, and we also celebrate the many heroes and virtues of the church, which inspires us and gives us hope.

3. Commitment to God's World: We practice our faith missionally – that is, we do not isolate ourselves from God's world, rather, we follow Christ into the world. We seek to fulfill the missio Dei in our generations faithfully passing on a living faith to the next generations. We believe all Christian communities exist for the benefit and blessing of the world at large; we seek therefore not to be blessed to the exclusion of everyone else, but for the benefit of everyone else. We see the earth and all it contains as God's beloved creation, and so we join God in seeking its good, its healing, and its blessing.

4. Commitment to One Another: In order to strengthen our shared faith and resolve, and in order to encourage and learn from one another in our diversity through respectful, sacred conversation, we value time and interaction with other friends who share this rule and its practices. We identify ourselves as members of this growing, global, generative, and non-exclusive friendship. We welcome others into this friendship as well. We bring whatever resources we can to enrich this shared faith and resolve.

#### Emergent Village as Ecumenical Conversation

For many new friends to our conversations Emergent Village often serves as their first step into ecumenical dialogue; as I've already highlighted, participants in our emerging conversation come from a wide array of traditions. Although we have a few thousand churches in the United States and more around the world, self-identifying with Emergent Village, we have determined it is not on mission for us to focus statistically on the number of churches or their respective denominational traditions but to practice being together for relational purposes bigger than any of us. This is alone is a remarkable feat, and though our conversation may be too young to fully appreciate the significance of the conversational space we are as we gather, we are nonetheless committed to hearing and encountering the unique emphases and distinctives we bring to one another.

Emergent Village values the particularity of church traditions, global shifts, cultural contexts and personal narratives. We value these things with a systemic hope that as each person/community brings the fullness of their being in conversation that we all have opportunity to more meaningfully interpret our respective traditions, contexts and narratives in light of an ever fuller understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as is only possible when we encounter otherness.

Because of our commitment to conversation and incarnational mission, it seems wise for us not to adopt an official doctrinal statement. It is not that participants in the conversation don't have strong beliefs, theological convictions and values; rather we seek to bring those to one another with a spirit of humility with an eye to living into the reign of God. Therefore, we strongly encourage our conversational partners and faith-communities to live into their distinctions with the recognition all of our traditions are finite, thus encouraging a posture of listening, deference, and humility better positioning us to actuate our "already present" unity in Christ.

Because of our conversational commitments Emergent Village also pursues interfaith dialogue and has invested significant resources into conversation with the other Abrahamic faiths. We have worked very close with a growing group of "Emerging Rabbis" who have formed an organization called Synagogue 3000.<sup>11</sup> In January 2006 a small group of emerging pastors and scholars joined together with emerging Rabbi's to share from our respective journeys of living into our understandings of mission and to learn together how to move responsibly within our traditions and institutions.

### Emergent Village as an Embodiment of Full Communion

This paper is the first known Emergent Village reflection on Full Communion and certainly cannot serve as a definitive positional paper on the subject; rather the hope is that this paper will further the dialogue and critical theological/practical reflection within

---

<sup>11</sup> Synagogue 3000 is the successor organization to Synagogue 2000 (S2K), and some of the key voices behind the creation and management of S3K are: Ron Wolfson, Larry Hoffman, Shawn Landres, Ellen Dreskin, Merri Lovinger Arian, and Joshua Avedon. You can learn more by visiting: <http://www.synagogue3000.org/>

the network of Emergent Village friends and those whom people Emergent Village is meeting through gatherings like the Faith & Order Commission of the National Council of Churches.

Emergent Village's description of itself as a "conversation" emphasizes our amorphous and decentralized nature. As I've already stated, Emergent Village is neither a church nor a denomination but a network of friends connected in mission, thus we do not have nor are we developing any formal Full Communion covenants with other organizations. Further, because many Emergent Village faith communities have connections to denominations, (some of which already have communion agreements while other faith communities have never heard of "full communion") our purposes and conversational structures preclude us from entering such agreements.

In a sense, Emergent Village is a movement toward full communion which sets its unity in Christ not in agreement regarding Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry but in the *missio Dei*. Generally speaking we are not distressed by our differing practices regarding Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry rather we find when we missionally focus on embodying the practical love of God and love of neighbor, life flourishes and our "B. E. M. practices" become more open and generous. Thus the current framing of Full Communion agreements as presented by the NCC appears to be something of a non sequitur to the purposes of Emergent Village, not because we're uninterested in church unity, but because we paradoxically lean into our traditions while simultaneously hold the institutionalization of our traditions loosely.

#### A Few Emergent Village Perspectives on Our Work in Faith & Order

- From our perspective the task of intrafaith Christian dialogue may be well served by developing a deeper Orthoparadoxy. Orthoparadoxy may be understood rightly holding paradox or contradictions. Orthoparadoxy is simultaneously an ethic embracing otherness, a hermeneutic for seeing connection and a theology of wisely holding what at first glance may appear to be irreconcilable.

- It would be our sense that the apparent dichotomy between “Faith & Order” and “Life & Work” is modern and artificial separation. We believe that our being and our doing are perichoretically one; what we do shapes what we believe, and what we believe shapes what we do.
- From our perspective comparative analysis of church traditions is helpful in as much as such information better equips us to understand the person/community with whom we are in conversation, but understanding our differences is not sufficient for making visible our unity. Christian unity is made visible in kenotic service (doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God).
- We believe that God’s dream for humanity is not the church; rather God’s dream for all creation is Shalom or in the language of Jesus Christ the “Kingdom of God.” For Emergent Village ecclesiology may best understood as a subheading under Christology and a theology of the reign of God.

#### Dénouement

As we come to the conclusion of this reflection on full communion from the perspective of a pastor and theologian who actively participates in the generative conversation and friendship that is Emergent Village, I confess my need of your eyes, your heart, your wisdom and your tradition(s) to sharpen this and to sharpen me for the sake of our unity in Christ. I submit the intent of these words to my friends in Emergent Village and to you, my friends in the Faith & Order Commission who have, for the joy set before you, labored toward Christian unity for far longer than Emergent Village has been in existence. I therefore, submit this paper as a working thesis or as a launching point for further conversation, with the hope that as we engage it together we will, in fact, manifest the love of God as we encounter one another.

National Council of Churches, Faith & Order Commission  
Abilene, Texas  
March 17, 2007