

## the Gospel and Our Culture

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This issues begins the eSeries of the newsletter, sent by email and located on the new GOCN website, where comment and discussion around the themes of the articles can take place. Included here are a couple of interesting reflections: **Rebekah Zorgdrager**, a minister of the Reformed Church in America, offers an exploration of ecclesiology in some of the early 'emergent' literature. That ecclesiology she finds to be significant, expressed more implicitly than explicitly. Another major article here is a sermon co-preached by **Catherine and Justo Gonzalez**. It revisits Revelation 3 and suggests some things more fundamental to its "knocking at the door" imagery than we have been accustomed to think. **The editor's** own 'Reflections' on theology in congregational life is included as a reminder that it is the congregation that theologizes, and that in a fundamental sense *everything* a congregation does counts as 'theology.' Enjoy the read, and join the conversation online. ---the Editor.

[Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church](#) [1]

Author: Rebekah Zorgdrager

The emerging church. What is it? Who is it? And what exactly do they mean by church? In other words, what is the ecclesiology of the emerging church? It seems like "the church" should be easy to define. Yet throughout time and across various Christian movements people's definitions of church – what it is, what it is for, who makes it up – have varied widely. How does the emerging church fit into this varied tradition? Is this a movement that defines church differently than it has ever been defined before? Or is the emerging church something old packaged in something new?

I believe the emerging church movement is a shifting back to old ideas in a new way.

I believe the emerging church movement is a shifting back to old ideas in a new way. Most, if not all, of the ideas and values held by those who write about the emerging church are not revolutionary or new, yet they combine to form an ecclesiology different than any mainstream ecclesiology at least since the reformation, if not before. That being true, however, it is very difficult to define an emerging church ecclesiology because those writing about it are generally preoccupied with other questions and concerns; ecclesiology is not in the forefront of anyone's mind or conversations. (Several books have informed my understanding of the emerging church as discussed in this article. They are indicated in full detail at the end of the article. They will be referenced throughout by author's last name and page number.)

There are many ways in which church is talked about – in terms of what it is, what it is not, what it should be, etc. – that work together to form an understanding of what church is in the emerging viewpoint. The emerging church as a movement began, exists, and thrives as a response to postmodernism. Postmodernism is a somewhat vague concept since it is defined as opposed to modernism. For the purpose of this discussion postmodernism will be viewed as a mindset which, "holds there is no single universal worldview. All truth is not absolute, community is valued over individualism,

and thinking, learning, and beliefs can be determined nonlinearly” (Kimball, 49-50). Postmodernism is not something the emerging church teaches, it is a cultural mindset that they are responding to, seeking to reach those who buy into the postmodern worldview (Kimball, 27, 36; McLaren, 8, 24). This is an important distinction to make and understand, for the leaders of the emerging church movement are not seeking to make people with a modern worldview switch over to a postmodern worldview, yet they are challenging those with a modern mindset to realize that some of their beliefs and assumptions are not hard and fast truths (Kimball, 49).

A strong emphasis in the emerging church conversation is that the current popular model for churches, the seeker sensitive model, does not reach people with a postmodern mindset; in fact such an approach is a turn off to people with such a worldview. This helps explain the impetus behind much of the emerging church movement. It is an effort to reach those with a postmodern mindset while acknowledging that there are good and bad things about such a mindset. The purpose is to reach out to such people where they are, as well as to learn what ought to be challenged and what can be affirmed within this newer worldview (Burke, 63; Kimball, 63).

Postmodernism, when talked about in the world of church, is often coupled with post-seeker-sensitive or post-Christian. There are a couple implications that go along with these shared labels. As stated above, people that view the world through postmodern eyes will not be reached, may even be turned off by, seeker-sensitive styles. In other words, these are people who were not brought up to believe in the Bible or go to church – convincing them to come back to church through a flashier style will not work because they were never part of church in the first place. This group of people was not raised as Christian; they do not automatically accept the Bible as an authority. There are people who were brought up in churches that fall into this category as well since they have bought into the cultural movement of postmodernism and do not credit the Bible with any sort of authority. These distinctions are made because the postmodernism that has swept much of America shows that America is no longer a Christian nation, more and more people here were not raised as Christians, or do not see the world through the lenses of Christianity or the Bible, and have either never heard the gospel, or think they have heard it but do not believe in it (Kimball, 68, 245).

In many ways the emerging church defines itself in the ways above as well as in opposition to other models of church, such as church as it was defined in the reformation and church as it is viewed within a modern worldview. Some offer the critique that trying to boil down a definition of church can result in oversimplifying things and distorting what the church truly is – something they believe happened during the reformation when the “marks of the church” were defined resulting now in many seeing church as an institution or something that is done, as opposed to seeing church as the people of God (Kimball, 93; Pagitt, 30-31).

The emerging church is defined in large part as something different, a move away from, the modern view of church. While some acknowledge that the modern church effectively reaches out to those with a modern mindset there is still quite a bit of antagonism towards the modern church and the inherent values it has/teaches. One of the major critiques of the modern church that the emerging church is seeking to distance itself from is seeing the church as a vendor of religious good and services. This is the market mentality where research is done, people are targeted, and the church makes its decisions based on those to whom it is marketing. Within this view, the church is simply there to offer people the kinds of religious services they need (or think they need) and initiatives are considered successful by the number of people reached, the size of a budget, etc. In other words the modern church has been run in ways very similar to a secular mindset of marketing and offering what people want in order to get them to partake in the services an organization has to offer. This model is not driven by any overarching value; it is driven by consumers and what consumers want (Burke, 39; Kimball, 105, 112, 115, 201, 215; McLaren, 189, 197; Pagitt, 40, 42). These things have nothing to do with what the Bible teaches or the kingdom of God, but much to do with our modern world and the way in which secular companies get people to purchase their products or become involved in the causes they support. The critique of the emerging church movement is that these are modern values that have no inherent place in the church and may actually work against what the church is supposed to be.

The emerging church does not simply define itself as opposed to modernity. There is also much discussion about what church is about – the elements that ought to be there in a healthy church. One element is church as a place where the body of Christ is healthy and in proportion. This means that in any given church there are not simply one or two people who wield all the power, but a group of people are being the church together, all seeking to use their gifts in service to God. Church then becomes a place that is not highly controlled but allows room for the Holy Spirit to lead people into significant encounters with God (Burke, 64-65, 93).

Language such as “going to church” is shied away from because it puts the focus on a physical place of gathering rather than on the people who together make up the church. The people of God who come together to worship God and serve him in mission, they are the church, not any particular building or place (Kimball, 91, 94-95). There is an eagerness to acknowledge that church will look different in different places; the emphasis is that all churches are those groups of people joining the Holy Spirit in the work of God’s kingdom. As one person put it churches ought to be concerned with, “More Christians, Better Christians, Authentic missional community, For the good of the world” (McLaren, 28). The emerging church has a focus on mission, community, worship, and mystery (Pagitt, 17). These, in some ways, are the new marks of the church.

### **Mission**

The church is missional. The emerging church movement began as an effort to reach people who were not currently being reached by the efforts of the average, or modern, church. This movement began not as an effort to get people already at church more involved or more committed, but to reach out to people who previously had nothing to do with church and no desire to change that. There is a strong emphasis that church is meant to produce disciples, people who live out the mission of living into God’s kingdom on earth (Burke, 119; Kimball, 15, 17). The church is not just missional; however, it is a missional community—that is, people who come together to live out the mission to which God has called them on earth. People not only engage in this mission individually, but as a community called by God to serve God together as well (McLaren, 36, 197; Pagitt, 17, 146). In some ways, people are living into their missional call most fully when they are living into it as part of a community of other believers.

### **Community**

This leads to another mark of the emerging church, the church as a community. The community and missional impulses of the emerging church cannot be completely separated from one another, although they are two different ideas. The church is a community of faith; people living out the things Jesus taught in such a way that non-believers will naturally be drawn in. There is a focus on being together, on genuine fellowship, on conversation and being together as what the church is supposed to be (Kimball, 204-205). The church is supposed to be a place where people actually live their lives according to the teaching of the gospel; a place where those who are not valued by society—the poor and undesirable—are welcomed, supported, and affirmed in their love and worth in God. The community of the church is called to be a place that lives not by the world’s values but by the values of God’s kingdom (McLaren, 183-184).

### **Worship**

Worship is another clear value of the emerging church. It may be more accurate to say that re-defining worship is a value of the emerging church. What is highly valued is being willing to view worship in new ways that lie outside of singing along with a band that plays up in front of people (Burke, 61). Oftentimes in the modern church people use the word worship to refer simply to gathering together to sing songs and maybe pray a little. There is a church service during which people worship (sing songs) and then listen to a sermon. However, the emerging church movement seeks to redefine worship in a more biblical sense, talking about worship as giving honor to God, humbling ourselves before the

Lord, glorifying Jesus. In this sense worship is not something that is done at a certain point in time, it is a focus of life together, it is present throughout any particular gathering, it is a way of life that brings honor and glory to God (Kimball, 114-115; Pagitt, 17, 50). In terms of a church service, this means that the entire service is viewed as worship, instead of just one portion of the meeting.

### **Mystery**

This brings us to the last mark of the emerging church, valuing mystery. Within the modern church/mindset everything is put into neat categories, the world is black and white and everything can and should be systematically explained and understood. A postmodern mindset, as well as the emerging church, reacts strongly against such suppositions, seeing this modern point of view as an unrealistic way of viewing the world, one that cannot sustain much scrutiny without falling apart. This emphasis on mystery is not simply about allowing there to be fewer answers, it is about experiencing rather than just knowing God (Burke, 54). For the postmodern there is something freeing about allowing for mystery; it feels more, not less, religious, which is a good thing (Kimball, 49). In the emergent church the focus is not on easy and simple answers to questions about the meaning of life or things such as creation and the trinity. The focus is on developing faith as the context in which such questions and mysteries are to be explored (McLaren, 78-79, 89). This type of focus allows people to have faith without thinking that they are then obligated to have all of the answers as well.

redefining church in a more biblical, less modern way

Those involved in and writing about the emerging church movement emphasize that they are not arguing for one particular model or way of doing church (Kimball, 14; McLaren, 28). What they are looking at is redefining church in a more biblical, less modern way. I imagine the lack of a direct discussion defining the ecclesiology of the emerging church is because that would not be a very postmodern thing to do. In defining what or who church is, concrete decisions are made; in a postmodern worldview it is difficult to make such a definition without becoming suspect. This is probably why the discussions surrounding church are very abstract and open. Church is defined by what it is not. Church is also defined by the elements it ought to include; yet this type of definition is far from concrete. There may be some danger in the emerging church movement defining itself, at least in part, by what it is not. In focusing so much on who you are not, it can be difficult not to become those very things. Questions much be asked, such as, Is the emerging church simply a vendor of religious goods and services marketed towards the postmodern, and not a new movement at all? If the modern church movement were to fade away would the emerging church movement have enough of an identity to stand on its own?

Yet, despite the necessity and validity of such questions, I believe that those involved in the emerging church appear to have an underlying ecclesiology of their own. The ecclesiology is not a new one, yet it does not totally fit into any past ecclesiology either. It argues for going back to the vision and values of the early church. The early church was birthed into a non-Christian society, when the values and goals of the church were not the norm or generally accepted truth – those who are part of the emerging church movement argue that this is the kind of society in which we are now living. The leaders of the emerging church do not argue that no one is around anymore who has a modern mindset or who assumes the truth of Christianity; but they do argue that fewer and fewer people have such a worldview, and that increasingly children are being raised into a postmodern, post-Christian worldview. These are the people the emerging church is working to reach.

Essentially, the ecclesiology of the emerging church defines church as people who gather in community to worship God and come together following the missional impulse of joining the work of the Holy Spirit in the spread of God's kingdom on earth.

The ecclesiology of the emerging church is old and new at the same time. Its values and goals are not new to the Christian faith, yet the ways in which these things are talked about have in mind where the church has been and where the church is going. The ecclesiology is unique to our current situation,

which makes it distinct from what has gone before. Because of the mindset and values of postmodernism, trying to define the ecclesiology of the emerging church in one sentence is like trying to hike the entire 2160 miles of the Appalachian trail in a single day. Maybe it's not quite that difficult, but the point is made. However, I will try anyway. Essentially, the ecclesiology of the emerging church defines church as people who gather in community to worship God and come together following the missional impulse of joining the work of the Holy Spirit in the spread of God's kingdom on earth.

NOTE. The following books have informed the understanding of emerging church discussed in this article: Spencer Burke, with Colleen Pepper, *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations about God, Community, and Culture*, Grand Rapids, MI: emergentYS-Zondervan, 2003; Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, Grand Rapids, MI: emergentYS-Zondervan, 2003; Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*, Grand Rapids, MI: emergentYS-Zondervan, 2000; and Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: emergentYS-Zondervan, 2003.

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### [Jesus Outside the Feast? A Sermon on Revelation 3:14-22](#) [7]

Author: Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez and Justo L. Gonzalez

Listen first to these verses (14-18):

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see."

I imagine that most of you have already checked your e-mail this morning. We are so used to doing this, that we hardly give it any thought. Things were different in the time of Revelation. The post itself was a luxury reserved for the Emperor and official business. John had to entrust his letter to a messenger who would go by ship to Ephesus, then travel from church to church. That was a far cry from today's e-mail!

Still, our e-mail is similar to the letters in Revelation in at least two ways. First, just as we are always concerned about hackers breaking into our e-mail, so were John and his friends worried about the possibility of the book falling into the wrong hands. Therefore, just as today some e-mail messages are encrypted, so did John encrypt his, to keep it from prying eyes.

But then there is the other side of the coin. Even though we do not wish to have everyone read our e-

mail, we like to send copies to others. It is as if we wanted people to overhear what we are telling each other.

And in this too our current practice is similar to that of Revelation. The book opens with seven letters to specific churches. But these are not private letters. They are not even letters intended to be read only in the gathering of each particular congregation. They are letters whose reading is intended to be overheard. Thus, by the time the reading in Laodicea comes to the verses that are our text for this morning, the Laodicean Christians have already heard the messages to the other six churches. They have heard that the Ephesians "are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake" of the Lord; that believers in Smyrna suffer poverty and are being afflicted; that those in Pergamum are living "where Satan has his throne"; etc. They have heard all of this, and they know that the problems in those other churches are not theirs. They are not persecuted; they are not poor; no one among them is teaching strange doctrine. On the contrary, they are all quite moderate, and they seem to have reached some sort of accommodation with the surrounding society. They have no problem.

But John sees things differently. You think your easy-going moderation, avoiding conflict and difficulties, is an asset? "Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." You think you are rich, and have prospered, and need nothing? "You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." You may think that you are better off than those other churches, poor, persecuted, beset by doctrinal debates; but you are not. Your problem is precisely that you have no problem!

Could it be that, precisely because we think we are rich, we are poor?

As I look at the church in today's world, I find that these words strike painfully close to home. We hear of Christians in Sudan suffering under the imposition of strict Moslem law; of Christians in North Korea pressured by a totalitarian state; of Christians in several countries in the Middle East hemmed in by a society that allows them to exist, but not to grow; of Christians who are so poor that they must meet under the trees; of pastors whose library includes five old but treasured books. We have none of those problems! We are safe, secure, sophisticated. And we say, "we are so blessed!"

In such circumstances, the words of Revelation strike terribly close. Could it be that, precisely because we think we are rich, we are poor? That our supposed sophistication is in truth a lukewarm commitment, that makes us neither hot nor cold? That, even though we think we are blessed, we are wretched?

But then this letter to the Laodiceans has another context beyond the book itself. Scholars are generally agreed that the entire book of Revelation was intended to be read at a communion service. At the table, Christians in Laodicea know that they are part of the same church as their sisters and brothers elsewhere. This table reminds them that they too are part of a church that dwells where Satan has his throne, of a church that is poor, persecuted, confused, struggling. This table makes them participants, not only in the suffering and the victory of Jesus, but also in the sufferings and the hopes of the entire church, of the church persecuted in Pergamum and confused in Thyatira.

the entire book of Revelation was intended to be read at a communion service

But the text continues . . . . Verses 19-22 say:

"I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

We have probably all seen the famous painting of Jesus standing at a vine-covered door, knocking. It is a door without a doorknob, one that must be opened from the inside. It is said that the door is to the human heart. Clearly the idea for the painting is taken from this passage in Revelation. Surely there is something true about the painting. But in this passage we just read, Jesus is not knocking on the individual human heart but at the door of a church--a congregation--the faithful gathered in Laodicea. And that makes an enormous difference in the interpretation of the passage.

It is not an informal, spontaneous gathering of the Laodicean church. They are gathered for their Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. We know this because John ends his whole letter with the words: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." Paul ends his first letter to the Corinthians in the same way: "Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." In both cases, the letter closes with words that introduce part of the Eucharistic service itself. It is a way for the writer to preach to the congregation even though he is not there in person. His letter is read at the point in the service that leads directly into the sacrament. They are gathered to celebrate the presence of the risen Christ in the midst of the congregation, for that was the major emphasis of the Lord's Supper at this time.

Jesus is not knocking on the individual human heart but at the door of a congregation

And yet--while the church is inside celebrating his presence with them, Jesus is outside, knocking, ready to join them if they will only open the door. Hear again the words of Jesus in the text: Jesus is outside, offering to come in and eat with them. They are eating without him. All the proper rituals, the right words, can be said, but Jesus remains outside until he is invited in, which means he comes in as the Lord, the host. He reclaims his Table and his church.

This church seems to have lost the sense of who is Lord. They do things as they wish--and they are doing well. To invite Jesus in would mean giving him the Lordship over their life as the church.

It is dangerous to invite Jesus into the church. Jesus is not a perfect guest by any normal standard. There is a famous story in Luke about Jesus at a dinner hosted by a leader of the Pharisees. Jesus attends--it is in his honor. But he immediately chastises the host about the guest list: he has invited the wrong people! Instead of inviting his friends, he should have invited the poor. No book of etiquette--no Miss Manners--would countenance such behavior. In other words, to invite Jesus in is to give up control over the gathering. For the church, truly to invite Jesus in is to remember that it is his church, not ours. He is never a guest. He is the real host or he is outside.

Laodicea evidently wasn't ready for this. They paid lip service to Jesus as Lord, but excluded him from the real governance of their life as a church. So even at their most solemn moments--when they celebrated his presence--they excluded him from exercising it. His rebuke: "You think I am in there with you, but I am outside, waiting to be asked in to assume my rightful place as your Lord."

The early church was right in what it celebrated at the Eucharist: The joyful reunion of the people of God with their risen Lord--at his Table--at his invitation. Every true celebration is a renewal of his presence as Lord, a renewal of our commitment to be his people, his church.

The gathering at Laodicea that first heard John's letter must have been shocked. Was John saying they weren't really a church at all? Not quite. At least the Lord was at the door knocking--a sign that these were his people and he belonged in there with them. And his words to the church were hopeful: "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent."

The words to Laodicea are also words to us, especially when we gather at the Lord's Table: The one to whose table we are invited is the Lord. It is his table, not ours. It is his church, not ours. Hear again the words to the church:

"Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." Amen.

[Editor's Note: See also the authors' commentary, *Revelation*, published by Westminster John Knox Press (1997) and available in digital form at [www.netlibrary.com](http://www.netlibrary.com) [8] (subscription required).]

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### [Reflections for a Conversation on Theology in Congregational Life](#) [12]

Author: George R. Hunsberger

When the Hartford Institute for Religion Research invited me to join 35 others at a consultation on the theme "Theology in Congregational Life," it set me to thinking about the variety of ways in which the accents of the Gospel and Our Culture Network conversations over the years have touched on that very thing. The conveners, particularly Carl Dudley, knew that about the network, and the invitation was a deliberate choice on their part to bring the fruit of those conversations to bear on the theme. What follows is the written response I submitted to the aspects of the theme upon which we all had been asked to reflect.

## **1. APPROACH TO THEOLOGY IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE.**

For the circles of people drawn to associate with each other in what is called the Gospel and Our Culture Network, one of the most characteristic convictions is that theology is the vocation of the whole church. What the church does, how it thinks, its assumed behaviors and instinctive worldview are understood to be theologizing activities. The notion of the "missionary encounter of the gospel with our (Western) culture" (as Lesslie Newbigin so often put it) implies it. Theology is contextual by its nature. Everywhere, when the gospel comes into the hearing of a people it finds its rightful home in the language and culture of those people while presenting them with a radical call to allegiance and loyalty in response to the announcement that in Jesus Christ the reign of God has come to be 'at hand.' The inner dialogue of the gospel with the culture that such believers share with all others in their society is a continuing one that sets in motion conversion as a way of life. And that way is essentially theological in that it is a path of recognition of the presence and character and purposes of God. At every turn, the people of God are making decisions, taking actions, and following practices that have inherent within them some angle of knowledge or understanding of God. When the people of God give voice to their worship of God or utter to companions their grasp of the good news, they are a theologizing community. It is to be such that God has sent them.

Such a 'missional church' as this thrives on the presence of many who are gifted by the Holy Spirit in the ways of theologizing, who help the church by carrying its theological discernments and actions into conversation with the traditions of other Christian communities past or present, near or far. These pastoral, teaching, evangelizing agents have a role to play in the congregation, but the role is not to



displace them from their calling to be, corporately, a theologian. Their role is first to be one with them in the common task of theologizing, while being also those trained and readied by the Spirit to stimulate, nudge, form, challenge, critique, honor, value and encourage their theologizing activity.

So then, **WHAT COUNTS AS THEOLOGY?** “Everything is theology. Every ‘small’ decision reflects and reveals what you think. Whatever is actually practiced is theology. Praying in practice is what is believed about prayer.” So said one small circle of people associated with the network, who as it happens are part of the ‘emergent’ movement’s conversation as well. Among them there is a strong conviction that people practice their way into beliefs. It is natural for them to assume that real beliefs are embodied, enacted, not merely spoken or espoused. They perceive there is much of the time a gap between what we think we think, and what we do think.

What counts as theology is likely to be a question about **whose** theology counts!

What counts as theology is likely to be a question about whose theology counts! It is not only that of the pastor or the magisterial teachers most skilled in the intellectual traditions. Those skilled in the daily routine practices of the faith are theologians also. In this view, then, a range of things count: songs composed and sung in the congregation; dialogue with the received tradition; recognitions of the gospel’s critique of the community’s culture and call to a divergent pattern of activity; patterns of listening and attending to biblical texts; efforts to discern the presence of the reign of God and interpret it among peers; owning the public-ness of worship, witness, and identity and knowing that in that public activity the gospel is grasped more and more; developing an imagination of the world in light of the mission of God and God’s intentions for the world; finding meaning in work and lending meaning to the workworlds in which people live daily.

A GOCN research team sought to capture the pattern of life inherent in a fresh hearing of the gospel in light of today’s culture and circumstances in the book, *StormFront: The Good News of God*. The authors paid attention to churches as they knew them and the theological insights present there. They reviewed their ideas along the way with a larger circle of fellow academics, consultants, and pastors to take the pulse of what the community of churches was hearing. They carried the dialogue along by articulating the vision that was continuing to sharpen as they attended to the culture and the scriptures. Their presentation of the volume was accompanied by a consultation featuring a report on how a small group of readers in each of two congregations found the book fruitful and illumining, or difficult and disturbing. That practice of ‘reception’ and dialogue with ordinary people in congregations encourages other congregations to travel the same road and reflect on the ways these visions touch their own realities. In other words, the book not only expected dialogue with academic peers in the theological guild as an outcome and use of the book, but it sought active engagement among the theologians who are the church, struggling with these concerns and seeking theological vision themselves for their daily routines.)

### **WHAT METHODS DO WE USE TO HELP IDENTIFY THEOLOGIES IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE? I**

suppose the first method is to affirm and honor the role of the congregation in theologizing by noting and valuing and sharing the places where that theologizing lies in their practices and utterances. The book *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* was the fruit of a team’s investigation in 15 churches. By visiting, watching, interviewing, and participating, the team tested a series of characteristics of missional churches gleaned from an earlier book in the GOC Series (Eerdmans), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. On their visits to churches which informants had suggested showed these characteristics, team members paid attention to how these showed up in actual practice and experience. Attention was directed to “what this looks like.” The volume reporting the fruit of the team’s work weaves together the stories and vignettes gathered from the congregations, portrayed along the lines of eight “patterns in missional faithfulness” which the team believed it had seen recurring in the congregations. Each of the patterns witnesses to theologizing dynamics evident in the congregations.

“Theology is distilled out of practice. Statements of Faith ought to be reverse engineered”

Again the voice of the small GOCN-Emergent group mentioned earlier: “Theology is distilled out of practice. Statements of Faith ought to be reverse engineered”—they should be drawn from what a congregation has actually been doing and the meaning of those practices for the people who do them. Formalized theological affirmations should move “from what we’re actually doing back to articulation of it. They are symbols of the journey.”

Based on the Treasure in Clay Jars study and the patterns it noted, a further step has been taken in GOCN research. For churches that are drawn to the missional church vision and intrigued by the portraits of churches in Treasure in Clay Jars, many ask for assistance to discern the presence of those patterns in their own life in order to find the path forward as they continue to cultivate their life and witness together. Over the past three years, a team of six has worked to produce a set of interactive discernment tools that have theological grip and practical connection. These include a quantitative survey instrument, an individual interview protocol, and a group process for (missional) biblical engagement and review of congregational life. These are being field tested in twenty congregations, and based on preliminary findings the instruments and the processes for using them are being refined to prepare a product ready for general use. Thus far, it is most notable that congregations responding to the reports from these tools do not instinctively rush to fashion a new program to attend to one thing or another, but they find themselves beginning to reflect on potential paths for engaging matters that are the inner stuff of programs and activities—i.e. theology!

**WHAT IS THE APPROPRIATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CONGREGATION’S THEOLOGY(IES) AND THE LARGER THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS?** The book *Missional Church* challenged institutionalization dynamics that sap the church of its life, but did not espouse an anti-institutionalism. To the contrary, it was clear that every group, every fledgling congregation has institutional form. It is culturally inevitable because of the nature of human social life. It is also a matter of the incarnation. The case is made that the forms of the church are also to be under review concerning how they do or do not effectively embody the gospel.

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Alongside of that, the book spent considerable time developing the notion of a “community of communities”—to say that while the local congregation is the essential, rooted expression of the church, no such local body dares live alone or in isolation or independence from the others, with whom it constitutes the church catholic. That sense of interdependence begs for self-knowledge regarding both the stream of past churches from which a congregation derives its present form of life and the companionship of other contemporary churches, near and far, whose similar calling in other places provides for mutual accountability to the gospel. That said, each congregation bears a vocation, a calling of its own and is responsible to be the expression of the church catholic in its place and time. This requires a pattern of critical dialogue with the past and the other, knowing that the challenge of the moment is not to mimic the forms of previous choices elsewhere but to be nourished by them to be faithful in their own time and place. (Cf. the title of Michael Warren’s book, *At This Time, In This Place*.)

## 2. CONVERSATION PARTNERS.

The GOCN grew first among missiologists. To that were added others in various academic arenas responsive to the gospel and culture issues at stake. Ministry “practitioners,” including pastors and others working in agencies supportive of the church’s life began to be involved in increasing ways. When the articulation of the Mission Church vision came to fullblown form, first at a conference in 1996 and then with the book’s publication in 1998, the partners in the network came more and more from locations in congregations, primarily pastors. While the gatherings and the work of research still involves mostly pastors and academics and consultants, increasingly the evidence is that in the congregations in which they minister the vision and the agendas it implies are flourishing and growing, and the people of those congregations are the more pervasive fabric of the network/movement. There

has been a very wide spread across denominational streams, and the theme has been taken seriously in the emergent movement. Seminaries and colleges use the literature as primary text material. It is a movement mostly Anglo, which is likely because there is a particular problematic energizing the network that is the problem of Anglo church life in ways that are not true for churches of other ethnicity. The Anglo churches are in need of catching up to many of the missional dynamics of life and witness that have been more commonly present in other ethnic communities for some time. Much of what is being learned draws on the experience of those churches in North America and the experiences of the new global Christianity. (Cf. in this regard Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* and Justo Gonzalez, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*.)

### 3. INFLUENTIAL AUTHORS.

Lesslie Newbigin's challenge (*Foolishness to the Greeks*) and his theological vision (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*) have been major influences. Will Willimon, Stanley Hauerwas, Douglas John Hall, John Howard Yoder, Justo Gonzalez and the students of Andrew Walls (Lamin Sanneh, for example) have also been formative in their culture critique and in their vision for the recovery of ecclesial identity. Not so much single authors but movements of thought that have been influential include: the base ecclesial community phenomenon in Latin America; the emphases of those who comprise the Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life; the rich tradition of insights on the dynamic of culture and gospel that comes from the missiological community of scholars and practitioners; the last sixty years of missiological reflection on the *missio Dei* and a trinitarian theology of mission in ecumenical circles; the church renewal ferment of the 1960s and 1970s that nourished many of us who remembered the vision while it seemed to be so much forgotten (including the work of such diverse voices as Gib Winter and Howard Snyder); various kinds of 'local theologizing' both in the third world and within North America; leading Roman Catholic voices such as Steve Bevans, Robert Schreiter, Michael Warren and Bill McConville; many of the leading voices in Emergent, including Doug Pagitt and Brian McLaren.

Some of the seminal visionaries most influential within the GOCN itself include Darrell Guder, Craig Van Gelder, Al Roxburgh, Jim Brownson, Inagrace Dietterich, Charles West, Pat Keifert, Lois Barrett, Mark Lau Branson, Barry Harvey, Steve Bevans, Wilbert Shenk, and Dale Ziemer. A project now completing its work has given attention to denominational judicatories and agencies as "missional systems," under the leadership of Al Roxburgh and Pat Keifert. Emerging work on a "missional and communal catechesis" has been led by pastors Ed Searcy and Chris Erdman along with Mike Budde (of the Ekklesia Project) and Alice Fisher. Michael Barram, together with Jeff Greenman, Grant LeMarquant, and Jim Brownson, is leading an initiative within the AAR/SBL arena to develop a sense of a missional hermeneutic in relation to biblical studies and theology. Leaders from a group of nine seminaries have begun conversation to find ways to travel together as they follow their express intentions to shape theological education around the implications of a missional view of the church and its leadership.

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