

THE LIVING CHURCH

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Lent Book Issue

Faith Foundations

What Is the Emerging Church?





The Greenbelt Festival, held annually in Cheltenham, England, has attracted many proponents of the emerging church movement. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams is the festival's patron. (Becky Garrison photo)

Come and See

The emerging church movement is an experiential phenomenon

By Brian Grantz

The emerging church movement has been described as a network of mostly evangelical, mostly Gen-X leaders who are exploring what it means to follow Jesus and “be church” in a post-modern society. Author Becky Garrison explores the movement and its impact in her new book *Rising From the Ashes: Rethinking Church*, a compilation of interviews with international worship leaders.

In discussing her book and the movement with Ms. Garrison, I noted that the emerging church movement isn't an institution, nor is it a particular pattern of worship, so what are its defining characteristics? She said that Brian McLaren, founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church, Spencerville, Md., has reflected that the emerging church “is not simply a

new model or style of ‘doing church.’ It's a complex and multifaceted conversation among Christian leaders about what it means to be followers of Jesus in these complex and changing and exciting times.”

The movement seems to defy traditional boundaries, Ms. Garrison said. “For example, at one workshop, I was struck by the synergy of how a largely evangelical crowd interacted with keynote speakers like Bishop N.T. Wright and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr.”

Ms. Garrison again pointed to Pastor McLaren for context in order to explain what the emerging church is emerging *from*. “He has noted that in one sense, the Church has always been emerging,” she said, “starting from the Book of Acts when the Church emerged from mono-cultural Judaism to become a multi-cultural faith community.

“The second part of the question is, Where is the Church emerging *to*?” Ms. Garrison said. “Sociologist and church historian Diana Butler Bass has said she finds vitality and growth in those mainline churches who are mining the resources of their tradition while tapping into a global spirit that infuses religion, politics and the culture at large, transcending organizations and individuals.”

Ms. Garrison expounded on the idea, presented in her book, that the emerging church is substantively different from the institutional iconoclasm characteristic of the 1960s. She said that “while a component of the emerging church has morphed into a marketing phenomenon replete with services geared to attract the coveted young adult demographic, the international emerging church scene portrays a more inclusive picture of what it

means to be followers of the risen Christ in the 21st century.”

Given that element of transcendence that Ms. Butler Bass cited, I asked Ms. Garrison how the continuity of the faith is expressed in the



Ms. Garrison: The movement “portrays ... what it means to be followers of the risen Christ in the 21st century.”

emerging church. What is the nature of the “bathwater” being thrown out, and does the “baby” left behind look like Jesus? She pointed to a commentary from Phyllis Tickle, former religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*, that about every five hundred years, the Church feels compelled to have a “giant rummage sale.” Ms. Tickle observes that “during the last Reformation five hundred years ago, Protestantism took over hegemony. But Roman Catholicism did not die. It just had to drop back and reconfigure. Each time a ‘rummage sale’ has happened, whatever was in place simply gets cracked into smaller pieces, and then it picks itself up and reconfigures.”

While classical Anglicanism seems to be a favorable environment for the emerging church expression, Ms. Garrison and I discussed how there also seems to be some tension inherent between contextual worship arising from the community and the Book of Common Prayer, not to mention Episcopal hierarchy and institutional expectations. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* speaks to the essential nature of the liturgy to shape belief. While recognizing the need for liturgy to connect with the people in profound ways — and acknowledged that it often does not — the idea of liturgy arising primarily from context can easily turn into *lex credendi, lex orandi*, which can lead to idiosyncratic faith. Asked how emerging church proponents might deal with that tension, Ms. Gar-

Rising from the Ashes Rethinking Church

By **Becky Garrison**. Seabury. Pp. 177. \$18. ISBN 978-1596270626.

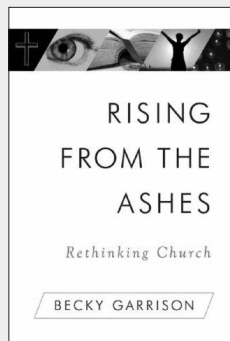
In the early 1990s, a crisis was brewing in the institutional church. A change was coming, but what church would look like when the dust settled could not be predicted. Since then, the communications revolution has changed the manner and mode of our interaction. The challenge facing the Church today is enabling leaders to share Jesus in ways that make sense in this new landscape. This is where the emerging church conversation begins.

There are many questions I have longed to ask the leaders of the emerging church movement simply to learn more about the thoughts, hopes, motivations and intentions of this new expression of the Christian faith. In *Rising from the Ashes*, Becky Garrison undertakes that work in earnest, asking relevant and insightful questions of many emerging church leaders from several faith traditions.

Written in question and answer

format and organized by conversational threads, the book provides a survey of the broad range of thought and practice described as “emergent.” Some of the participants in this conversation are Anglican, some are mainstream evangelicals, and some are at the fringes seeking to find new expressions of the faith outside of the institutional church. By design, the author’s voice is heard, with few exceptions, only in the questions asked, allowing those who respond to speak for themselves directly to the reader. The transitions between these often disparate voices can be jarring, and because excerpts from these interviews and dialogues are presented without comment, it is tempting to assume that the author believes all ideas to be of equal merit, which is not the case.

Like the emerging church movement itself, *Rising from the Ashes* is intended to encourage readers to think and question and, above all, engage in conversation about future expressions of the Christian faith, both within and beyond its institutional structures. (The Rev.) Brian Grantz



workshops and emersion courses offered by Karen Ward, abbess of the Seattle-based Church of the Apostles, and the congregation’s Praxis Mission Center. “Interested clergy and lay leaders also can check out Anglimergent (www.anglimergent.org), an online forum forming for Anglicans interested in incorporating emerging church insights,” she said. □

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