

2007

# The Decline of Denominational Loyalty in a Postmodern Time a Call for Unity

Rebecca Groves

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/ma\\_theses](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/ma_theses)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Groves, Rebecca, "The Decline of Denominational Loyalty in a Postmodern Time a Call for Unity" (2007). *MA Theses*. Paper 6.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in MA Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary.

THE DECLINE OF DENOMINATIONAL LOYALTY IN A POSTMODERN TIME:

A CALL FOR UNITY

by

REBECCA GROVES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

THESIS ADVISER: TERRI ELTON

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2007

This thesis may be duplicated

## ABSTRACT

*Mainline denominations in America have found themselves in a state of crisis. Weekly attendance and membership numbers have been in a steady decline for decades. Perhaps most visible is the loss of 20-something men and women who are freely walking out the back door. But are they leaving the church or just that particular congregation? The purpose of this essay is examine the 20-somethings of our day, what they are hopeful to find in a church and how the church can help love and support this generation in a postmodern time. Part one looks directly at the decline of denominational loyalty offering reasons why denominational lines are blurring. Part two begins a conversation wondering how our church can respond in this new day to the men and women who so freely move from church to church, and how they might just be the first step in God's call for unity.*

## INTRODUCTION

My mom grew up in rural Minnesota as a proud Swedish Lutheran in a beautiful white steeple, stained glass, community-active church. The town she grew up in had a population of 260. There was a German Lutheran church in the same town and both



churches were thriving, serving the community and its many active members. But the two hardly acknowledged the others existence. It is hard to comprehend how these two Lutheran churches could not see their glaring similarities even in the midst of cultural differences. Interestingly, five decades later in 2000, the two congregations were forced to acknowledge one another when the German Lutherans merged with the Swedish Lutherans, as both churches are in a serious crisis of decline and the German Lutheran church had to close its doors. The two congregations now worship together, but even so, this rural church is

still losing members, mostly to funerals held in its beloved sanctuary. My grandparents have been active in this church their entire lives. Grandma has voiced her opinion many times, “There is no reason these churches should be so small. People say it is because our town is smaller, but it’s not. Every house that was occupied while we were our healthiest is still lived

in. The people are there, and they still need to hear the good news. It is time the young people get creative and figure out what they need.”

Grandma is right, and as a life-long leader in the church she has many valuable things to say. The times are different, but the good news is the same and people are as hungry for it today as they were fifty years ago. Yet somehow our churches continue to decline in membership even while there is a growing interest in all things “spiritual.”

As more churches struggle with membership decline causing some to shut their doors, it is now time to look directly at the times we are living in, questioning where the young people of our churches have disappeared to and begin to pray in earnest, listening for where God is leading the church in this new day. This paper will focus on the mainly under 30 crowd of today, often called Generation Y. The exact age group of this generation has been highly debated, but in this paper I will focus on the men and women, born from 1975-1985 who are between 22 and 32 years old. This group is sometimes called Millennials, iGen (Internet Generation) and Net Generation given their fluency in technology.<sup>1</sup> They are a thoughtful group, influenced by postmodern beliefs as well as the divided times we find ourselves in today.

I believe I am most interested in the decline of denominational loyalty amongst Generation Y, because I see it all around me. Not necessarily a decline in Christian loyalty, although that is present as well. But during the past few years, I began to notice a growing trend within my very closest friends. They all married or were going to marry someone from a completely different denominational background. Heidi and Tim, raised United Methodist and Catholic, respectfully; John and Shannon, Lutheran and Baptist turned Agnostic and Catholic; Sarah and Brooks, Covenant and Catholic; Sarah M. and Mike, Lutheran and Non-denominational; Mark and Julie, Assemblies of God and Catholic; and my husband Rory and I, Assemblies of God and Lutheran. The only couple friends we have that married with the same denominational background are couples who met while working at Bible camp together.

I began to ask each couple questions about how these different upbringings have played out in their marriage. I had three of our couple friends respond to seven questions for this paper. The responses came back with as much insight to the times we are living in as any

---

<sup>1</sup> *Collection of News and Articles on Generation Y*. Retrieved October 20, 2007 from <http://www.gen-y.org/>

book I found on the subject. I am grateful for their frank and candid answers. It is my hope that through these three couples a picture will begin to form of who the 20-somethings are who have grown up in the church, feeling free to explore various denominations. You will find their responses placed throughout this paper.

This paper will discuss the decline of denominational loyalty our church<sup>2</sup> is experiencing today, the causes for such a decline including the effects of postmodernism, and finally a discussion of how our churches can respond in this new day. The decline of denominational loyalty does not have to be a bad thing. When these three couples married one another they committed to a lifelong conversation of their differences and similarities, grounded in the unity they share in Christ Jesus. All denominations, through the increase of these cross-denominational unions, will soon find themselves joining in the same conversation, acknowledging our differences while recognizing the unity we share in the blood of Christ, shed for *all* people.

### **PART ONE: Changes in the Church**

Three days ago I received a letter from a church in Minneapolis that I attended for two years while attending Luther Seminary. It is located right in the middle of a transient neighborhood, literally placed in a world of hurt. But this congregation, so focused on maintaining who they were when the church was surrounded by same-color, same-income families has lost its passion, and with it, countless members. The letter I read was carefully worded, spelling out their need for more money before the year's end. The last lines read, "The Finance Committee does not want to come before the congregation in 2008 and ask for 'Up and Over Giving' to meet general operating expenses. These are hard times for all of us, and hard decisions may have to be made."<sup>3</sup>

The church<sup>4</sup> is living in a different day<sup>5</sup>. The statistics of Protestant church membership decline are startling. In 1992 the average number of worshipers in the United

---

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the following terms and definitions of church will be used:  
church -

<sup>3</sup> Zion Lutheran Church, congregational letter dated September 25, 2007

<sup>4</sup> When I use the term church, I am imagining God's kingdom people, men and women who may be a part of a particular congregation, but more importantly see their lives as the hands and feet of Christ, spreading the good news for all who need to hear it.

<sup>5</sup> Brad Waggoner, LifeWay's vice president of research and ministry development says: "Decades ago, American culture supported church loyalty out of respect for the church, obligation to family, or social

States Protestant church was 102 members, a fairly low number to begin with. Since then, there has been a steady decline. In 2003 the average number of worshipers had dropped to 89 worshipers.<sup>6</sup> The numbers are even more bleak in certain parts of the country. "There are 1,000 mainline Protestant churches in the Greater New York region, serving a combined church membership that has declined to fewer than 300,000 congregants. In some communities, pastors preach to only a few dozen Sunday parishioners."<sup>7</sup> This decline is happening all across America. "The percentage of American adults who identify themselves as Protestants dropped below 50% about the year 2005."<sup>8</sup>

The Lutheran church is slowly shrinking as well. In 2002, according to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) secretary Lowell Almen, the ELCA calculated 61,871 net membership losses. Since 1990 the ELCA has lost over a quarter of a million members.<sup>9</sup> Some have justified the significant losses by explaining that churches are roll cleaning, a process that includes looking at their membership rosters and removing names of people who no longer participate in the congregation.<sup>10</sup> But this is no excuse, as roll cleaning is simply becoming honest to the actual numbers. Whether those members stopped attending within the year of the roll cleaning or in the decades previous, those members were still not participating actively in that congregation.

The Christian church in America on the whole is also losing ground. According to the Graduate Center of the City University of New York:

"The percentage of American adults who identify themselves as Christians dropped from 86% in 1990 to 77% in 2001. This is an unprecedented drop of almost 1 percentage point per year. At the present rate of change, most Americans would identify themselves as non-religious or non-Christian by the year 2035."<sup>11</sup>

---

expectations." LifeWay News Service. (2007, February 8). *LifeWay Survey Examines Church, Denominational Loyalty*. Retrieved April 2007 from <http://www.lifeway.com>

<sup>6</sup> B.A. Robinson, Trends Among Christians in the U.S. Retrieved 2007, July 1 from: [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_tren.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_tren.htm)

<sup>7</sup> *Mainline Protestants: Churches at a crossroads*. Retrieved 2007, September 27 from <http://www.thejournalnews.com/mainline/>

<sup>8</sup> "Study finds number of Protestants is falling," Houston Chronicle, 2004-JUL-21. Posted on the Free Republic bulletin board at: <http://www.freerepublic.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Chang, P. (2004, August 17) ELCA Reports Marked Membership Decline Retrieved 2007, September 27 from

[http://www.christianpost.com/article/20040817/2875\\_ELCA\\_Reports\\_Marked\\_Membership\\_Decline.htm](http://www.christianpost.com/article/20040817/2875_ELCA_Reports_Marked_Membership_Decline.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "American Religious Identification Survey," by The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, at: [http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_studies/aris.pdf](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/aris.pdf)

This is a rapidly paced decline, and for those of us who love the church, these statistics are hard to hear. It is hard to hear because we know that the news we have to share of God's mission to love and save the world is for everyone, and numbers are supposed to grow as souls hear that the good news is for them. In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded each one of us Jesus-followers to go and make more disciples, adding to the number.<sup>12</sup> The closing of more and more church doors begins to pose a real problem and a serious threat to the church as we know it today. So why are there so many leaving? And where are they going?

Many people leave a church believing the church institution has nothing to offer them and continue on their spiritual quest. But perhaps the picture isn't so bleak for the whole church if we take a closer look at where people are going when they leave a particular congregation. Another factor is becoming more visible. Changing churches frequently and denominational switching is becoming more common. When a person leaves one church, it is likely that they will pursue another. A Barna study revealed, "One out of seven adults switches churches every year, and one out of six attends more than one church on a rotating basis."<sup>13</sup> Given these numbers, it seems that church-goers are becoming a bit more mobile, less loyal to one congregation or even denomination. Furthermore, "One-third of all American Protestant churchgoers feel less than positive they will continue attending the same church in the near future. And if they do switch, about one out of four would only consider another church in the same denomination."<sup>14</sup>

### *Sarah and Brooks*

Sarah and Brooks have been married three years. Between the two of them they have at one point or another been a part of the following churches: United Methodist, Covenant, Catholic, an emerging church, Evangelical Free, Baptist, and Presbyterian. Brooks describes the Catholic church he grew up in this way: "very programmed. The community had a similar feel. Visitors were often scoffed at for 'sitting in our pew,' not standing up when expected during the service, or going to receive communion when there was any doubt whether or not they 'should.' I am using quotation marks a lot because these are the types of things people would talk about often. Very little emphasis was put on being an active participant in one's faith, and few fellowship activities or faith building programs were offered outside of the Sunday service."

---

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 28:19

<sup>13</sup> Satterwhite, S. Beliefnet. *Why Can't We Commit?* Retrieved on 2007, October 31 from: [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/46/story\\_4603\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/46/story_4603_1.html)

<sup>14</sup> Ellison Research. (2007, February 8). One-third of all churchgoers have less than full loyalty to their church. Facts and Trends, Retrieved 2007, May 1 from <http://www.ellisonresearch.com/releases/20070208.htm>

The church Sarah grew up in was quite different, a very charismatic Covenant church with a praise band, flag dancing and speaking in tongues. Sarah and Brooks dated through high school and college and married a year after they graduated. During college, Brooks was saved at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes gathering. It was then that his faith became his own.

They have participated in many churches, searching for a good fit for the two of them. Brooks wrote, “We look for churches that have a young demographic with



people we can relate to and form lasting relationships with. We also value worship services that are upbeat and strong, contemporary and engaging. We look for churches with a heart for outreach in our own communities and those around the world. Sarah and I have a passion for missions, and although we cannot go on a trip right now we still love a community that gives us avenues for donating to them. A strong scripturally based message from the pastor each week that challenges us to think and re-evaluate topics is

something I particularly value as well as does Sarah. A church that gets people connected in small groups for worship, fellowship, and accountability is something that we have enjoyed and look for now.”

Sarah wrote about the first church they regularly attended as newlyweds, “Once we got married we went to a lot of churches and went church shopping. We ended up going to Bethel, a Baptist church in Owatonna for two years. We picked it because we enjoyed the music (alive and contemporary) and the pastor was really good and kept my attention (used a lot of technology- powerpoint, video clips). I didn’t enjoy after church because it was awkward so we always tried to get out as soon as possible.” She then commented how this has changed at the church they currently attend, a Presbyterian church in New Zealand. Sharing how she values people and community at church she wrote, “Here it is great to be plugged in and to want to stay after church and hang out with people and friends. We are in a small group with people our age. Some of our friends are in leadership so they ask us to help do stuff. We are always going out after church with our friends from church. We both see church as an extension of our faith in Jesus Christ. We know that to gather in community is something that He calls us to do, and that through this we should be striving to change our communities and world around us by the fruits of that community.”

Sarah and Brooks concluded with some insightful ideas of where they see the Christian church in America dropping the ball. Brooks wrote, “I think we are becoming more disconnected from the idea of church being a community of believers that strives to make change in the community and world around us by getting involved everywhere, getting the word everywhere, and spreading love everywhere. Instead people are being taught how to build their own personal faith (which is good), but not how to build another’s faith, or affect another’s life. Church has become more about ME.” Sarah adds, “I think as a church we need to get out and show love, give hope and inspire faith (our churches mission statement) to those around us by welcoming and making the unusual person (not the norm you see coming to church) welcomed into our church, serving those around us, and



showing that church is not just a building and God is not just someone or something that joins us on a Sunday but God is alive in us.”

Aware of the topic of this paper, Brooks wrote the following about his frustration with rigid denominationalism. “People are finding simply another way to separate or alienate people from coming to God. We have found so many great things from so many different churches. Had Sarah and I become so staunchly engrained in one church denomination and not gone to so many different ones, we would not have been touched by God in so many ways. Some churches preach to their members that they are the right way to follow Christ and others are doing it wrong. I have realized now that there are no bad denominations that worship Jesus Christ as our savior, just bad churches. I grew up in a ‘less than ideal’ Catholic church. My friend Peter goes to a Catholic church that emphasizes a personal relationship with Christ more than some Evangelical churches that I have attended. I think if we would collaborate with all churches that teach Christ as our savior, despite our interpretative differences, then we would see Christ’s Ministry grow instead of just our own church’s ministry.”

Sarah and Brooks have a heart for God’s whole kingdom, all denominations. Because of this their movement within different denominations of churches has not been a concern for them. They are most hopeful to find a place where they feel welcomed, involved and inspired.

A study by Ellison Research reveals this trend in denomination and church switching is not uncommon. “In the typical Protestant congregation, one-third of the people in the pews are not definite in their plans to continue attending that church. If they were to leave, three out of 10 would not consider it a big deal to switch denominations”<sup>15</sup> says Ron Sellers, president of Ellison Research.

Another study asked church-goers what they would do if they moved to a different area and had to find a new church. Of this sampling, 16% said the exact denomination of the church really doesn’t matter and 2% claimed they would prefer to switch denominations anyway.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

Interestingly, a person who is not particularly loyal to one single denomination may be a very active participant within the church they attend. In a 1999 study entitled '*Denominational Identity from age 16 to 38*,' researchers concluded that "a history of denominational switching *does* predict more loyal churchgoing."<sup>17</sup> Now that is good news for the whole church! In a time when switching is more and more common, and denominational loyalty is on the decline, this study is stating that men and women who do switch denominations are often more active within the congregation of which they are a part. This has certainly been the case for Sarah and Brooks.

Could it be that we are actually living in a time when men and women are taking so seriously what they align themselves with, that church switching may be a sign of hope? Could it be that these very people leaving their denominations (and the church) could be some of the strongest future leaders within the whole church?

In the following sections, we will investigate the causes of denominational decline and begin to think creatively how to be the church and support these men and women as they search for a place that suits their needs. And hopefully, churches will be ready to welcome these church shoppers when they do stop in their sanctuary, these men and women who may very well represent the future leaders of your own church.

---

<sup>17</sup> Two-hundred and six 38-year-olds were interviewed regarding their church involvement. These 206 had all been interviewed as 16-year-olds and belonged to three different denominations of churches, Baptist, Methodist and Catholic. The study looked at what denomination they were raised and where they currently worshiped. 21% had left the denomination where they were raised. Of those 21%, 33% said they switched because of the influence of their spouse. 7% switched because another church had "better children's programming." 19% were "looking for a church that shared my beliefs" 12% gave reasons of simply wanting to be a part of a community where they felt they belonged. And 11% gave other uncategorizable reasons. Hoge, D. and O'Connor, T. (Spring 2004) Denominational identity from age sixteen to age thirty-eight. *Sociology of Religion* Retrieved May 1, 2007 from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0SOR/is\\_1\\_65/ai\\_n6141812](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_1_65/ai_n6141812)

## **PART TWO: Causes of the Decline of Denominational Loyalty**

Before making changes on how to do church in this new time, we must first begin to understand why denominational switching is becoming more common. We are living in a divided time. America is largely split with differing opinions about our President and the war in Iraq. Others can guess how you vote based on whether you tune in to FOX news or NPR. Morning television shows highlight our division by sitting five strong-willed, outspoken women around a kitchen table as they battle out the days controversial issues, all voicing their personal views. The church makes it into the media most often through scandal or the unproductive quotes of extreme church leaders, and each Christian sect is left to endorse or reject the divisive words spoken in the name of Jesus. All of these divisions have led to a generation of skeptics: skeptical of power, skeptical of institutions, skeptical of anyone who claims absolute knowledge about any one thing.<sup>18</sup>

One of the greatest contributing factors to the decline of denominational loyalty is this time with such divisions that we live in. Many believe one of the divisions is that we are living in a time shifting between modernity and postmodernity<sup>19</sup>. By looking at the main tenants of modern thinking, and then defining the changes happening as we move into postmodernism we can begin to think creatively about how this postmodern mindset changes the way people share their faith in this emerging time.

---

<sup>18</sup> McLaren, B. (1998). *The Church on the Other Side*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.(163-164). McLaren's thoughts on how church needs to be re-invented in this postmodern time serves as a helpful backdrop for all the postmodern two-denominational couples out there and where they will find common ground. His fourth chapter is called, 'Trade up your traditions for tradition- Distinguish between church traditions and the Christian Tradition, and move emphasis from the former to the latter.' This way of valuing Christian Tradition over church traditions falls in alignment with the beliefs and attitudes of a 20-something- especially two people coming from two different church backgrounds

<sup>19</sup> Webber, R. (2006). *Ancient Future Faith*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books.18.

Webber writes of the six paradigms of church history, "while these divisions are somewhat artificial because history does not change abruptly, we can nevertheless speak convincingly of the following periods of western thought:

Primitive Christianity: the first century

The common era, with the emergence of classical Christianity (100-600)

The medieval era, with the formation of a distinct Roman Christianity (600-1500)

The explosion of the Reformation and the growth of Protestantism (1500-1750)

The Modern Era, with the growth of denominations (1750-1980)

The Postmodern Era, now emerging (1980- )

### *Shifting from Modernity to Postmodernity:*

The definition of modernity should sound very familiar. The world that we live in is still largely influenced by this period. Robert E. Webber is a seminary professor watching closely as modernity shifts into this new time.

“The three most central features of modern thought are: 1) individualism, which asserts the ultimate autonomy of each person; 2) rationalism, which is characterized by a strong confidence in the power of the mind to investigate and understand reality; and 3) factualism, which insists that the individual, through the use of reason, can arrive at objective truth.”<sup>20</sup> Moderns connect rational thinking with truth and make “reason and logical argumentation the sole arbiters of right belief.”<sup>21</sup>

The modern worldview values the individual, logical reasoning, conclusive science, and acquiring knowledge as a means of seeking absolute truth.<sup>22</sup> Sharply contrasting, and in direct defiance of the modern worldview, lies the postmodern world view, skeptical of power, highly valuing genuine community, unimpressed with the perfection, attracted to the authentic and comfortable with unresolved conversations and thoughtful discussions.

Brian McLaren is one of the strongest voices within the church as it moves from modernity into postmodernity. He has provided the following pithy statements to define postmodernism.<sup>23</sup>

Postmodernism:

- Is skeptical of certainty
- Is sensitive to context
- Leans toward the humorous, doesn't take itself too seriously
- Highly values subjective experience
- Togetherness is a rare, precious and elusive experience; values community.

Postmodernism is skeptical of certainty and absolute knowledge. Postmoderns are tired of a world trying to force-feed precontrived answers and rationalized step-by-step thinking that leads all people to the same conclusions as every one else around them.

People with this mindset are skeptical of people in powerful positions claiming to know something absolutely. “Postmoderns question the concept of universal truth discovered and proved through rational endeavors. They are unwilling to allow the human intellect to serve

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Grenz, S. (1996). *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Kimball, D. (2003). *The Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 50. This book unites postmodern thinking and how this thinking changes the way we do church. Kimball has many tangible examples of how things have changed from modernity to this postmodern time.

<sup>23</sup> McLaren, B. (1998). *The Church on the Other Side*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 163-164.

as the sole determiner of what we should believe.”<sup>24</sup> “Whereas the Enlightenment affirmed the idea that man’s capacity for knowledge was unlimited, the postmodern mind see limits.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, a smooth-talking person claiming to know all the answers to life’s questions is quickly devalued. Authenticity and a comfort in not knowing all the answers are both highly esteemed.<sup>26</sup>

Postmoderns are comfortable with a spiritually open theology and thrive on differing opinions and views.

“Postmoderns are not necessarily concerned to prove themselves ‘right’ and others ‘wrong.’ They believe that beliefs are ultimately a matter of social context, and hence they are likely to conclude, ‘What is right for us might not be right for you,’ and ‘What is wrong in our context might in your context be acceptable or even preferable.’<sup>27</sup>

Because of this, spiritual pluralism and moral relativism are more common in this time.

If we stop for a moment, it is not hard to see why this new way of thinking is beginning to stir things up in the church. The center of the church is the absolute truth in the love that was shown for all of us on the cross. Clearly if a large segment of the population is beginning to abide by these new postmodern values and views, the church has to be wondering how to present the absolute truth of the gospel to a group that largely rejects any claim of absolute truth. This will be discussed later in this paper.

### John and Shannon

John and Shannon were married 2 years ago. John was raised Lutheran and has since become Agnostic. Shannon “started out a little Lutheran girl through elementary school. Then, in junior high, my parents switched to Trinity Evangelical Free Church. I didn’t get too involved besides Sunday worship. Then, a couple years later (9<sup>th</sup> grade), we decided to start attending Berean Baptist Church. I was a bit more involved at this church but decided to be in First Light at Prince of Peace Lutheran as a high-schooler. All of the churches were fairly large, Trinity being the smallest. I liked that one the least—I think it’s because I couldn’t blend in!”

Shannon says that she liked Berean Baptist because it drew clear lines on certain issues and “gave me a clear picture of morality and a moral God. But then I went to college and things fell apart in that way of thinking...having such a black and white understanding just didn’t work anymore. I wanted something that was clear and moral but that was expansive and FREE, like the GOD I KNEW I believed in. I found Catholic teaching to be just that...it is conclusive and has set lines, but within

---

<sup>24</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Alford, C. *Postdenominationalism*, Baptist Press, Retrieved May 4, 2007 from <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/8255.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Pagitt, D. (2005). *Church Re-imagined*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>27</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 38.

its boundaries is an openness—an openness to use my own conscience rather than blindly following Catholic teaching. I loved the rich history that included an openness to such figures as Teresa of Avila, Dorothy Day, John of the Cross, St. Francis, Thomas Aquinas, Terese of Lisieux, and on and on...these people were often radical and saw God in such a beautiful BIG way....and the Catholic church has them in their history, and I love that. I also love the Eucharist—it’s mythical,



mystical, and still literal connection between us and Christ, eating Christ for nourishment WITH Others in community to say to each other that we commit to each other and will work to be like Christ for each other, with each other for others.”

Shannon met her husband John at a wedding. She had always assumed she would marry a Christian man, “but when I met John, I was intrigued by how he sought truth in his life. He didn’t come to the same conclusions as I did,

but he was seeking and living intentionally.” Interestingly, John, when looking for a life partner, “was looking for a Christian. It wasn’t a hard requirement, but I thought it would be a major plus. My own agnosticism doesn’t change the fact that I think there is a normalizing and necessary aspect to participating in ones culturally dominant religion. I think it will be good for my children to be raised in a Christian household. I also thought that a strong Christian faith would be indicative of other personality traits I value. So it wasn’t a firm requirement that I marry a Christian, but it was definitely a huge draw...”

Many were caught off guard when Shannon and John continued to pursue their dating relationship. “My mom was concerned because John didn’t have a church background. She asked me a lot of questions—but was ultimately supportive of my choice to continue dating him. She wasn’t concerned about denominations, though, because my becoming Catholic was already unsatisfactory to her...she was worried about him not being a Christian.” I asked what challenges they’ve come across with two different belief systems, “John and I struggle with finding authentic ways for him to express his values and how he feels about truth, life, etc. Exercise/martial arts is pretty close for him because it is a way to honor the body and all that it gives to us in life and it also requires vigilance, which is key to survival. I have felt supported by him in the ways that I express my faith...he engages with me in my graduate studies in theology, he attends church with me every week and sometimes more than once a week. He will pray with me if I ask him to, and he is excited and happy to teach our children the Bible, about Jesus and to raise them in a Catholic Christian context. Instead of dragging me down, John has challenged me to live my faith more authentically and to really know what it is that I believe. He gives me energy because we are so different. I am convicted to truly live the gospel in our marriage and in life because of his presence.”

John and Shannon’s story is not that uncommon any more. For a number of reasons, men and women are falling in love with a life partner with a different upbringing, denominational background, faith tradition, or a completely different belief system. Yet, in the day we find ourselves in, there is a comfort with the conversation these differences bring,

a widening of our perspectives and a broadening of the way we see the world. The following are more influences that are contributing to this blurred time.

### *Para-Church Organizations*

Another reason denominational lines are becoming less visible is the rise of parachurch organizations. These groups are increasing in number and in size, uniting denominations in one common Christian group. When I was in high school I was very active in Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), meeting every Monday night with 75 students from my school representing most churches in our community. We knew where each other went to church on Sunday and Wednesday, but we also were deeply aware of the unity we shared on Monday nights through Christ Jesus. This recognition of our connectedness was taught to me at age 15 by this group of FCA friends, and has largely shaped the way I see God's Kingdom.

FCA, Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity, Promise Keepers, Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) and many other parachurch groups are all contributing towards Christians coming together, recognizing the unity they share as part of God's Kingdom. The mission of these groups is clear. Campus Crusade plainly states, "We cooperate with millions of Christians from churches of many denominations and hundreds of other Christian organizations around the world to help Christians grow in their faith and share the Gospel message with their fellow countrymen."<sup>28</sup> MOPS International also brings many different denominations together through its efforts to reach out with the gospel, "MOPS programs are chartered in churches of many different denominations and Christian traditions, but all share the common desire to reach out with the gospel of Jesus Christ and to bring glory to God in everything."<sup>29</sup> These groups are physically bringing men and women together and helping draw a picture of God's Kingdom, an inclusive Kingdom that unites us children of God.

### *Church Colleges*

Church colleges have become more diverse in denominational and world faith traditions. In 1960, 91% of St. Olaf College's student body was Lutheran. Today at this

---

<sup>28</sup> See the Campus Crusade Website: <http://www.ccci.org/about-us/ministry-profile/index.aspx>

<sup>29</sup> See the MOPS website: <http://www.mops.org>

Lutheran college, the number of Lutherans enrolled has dropped to 39%.<sup>30</sup> This is intentional as church colleges are making a serious effort to make the student body mirror the diversity of the world. Gustavus Adolphus College is in the midst of a very intentional initiative to find students who represent their most underrepresented groups, through the forming of a presidential task force.<sup>31</sup> Because of the growing diversity on many church college campuses, it is much more likely that any student's circle of friends would include many different faith traditions. And as college is a common place to meet a life partner, the odds have increased that the person they fall in love with would be part of a denomination or faith group different than their own.

### *Cross-denominational events*

Another reason denominational lines are blurring is the rise of the Christian music industry as well as Christian conferences and festivals that bring people from all backgrounds together. Christian worship music is greatly aiding in this uniting, through shared worship songs. There is a whole world of praise music that is being sung in all different denominations of churches on Sunday mornings. And on Saturday nights, groups of listeners gather to hear their favorite musicians at church concerts. Christian artists are usually not outwardly one denomination over the other. They sing of universal joys and struggles in the Christian walk so any listener can relate regardless of his or her denomination.

Cross-denominational events, increased diversity in church colleges, para-church organizations and the current shift towards postmodernity are just a few of the reasons denominational lines are more frequently crossed. The effects of these factors are not hard to see. All I have to do is look at my husband and my closest couple friends.

### *Sarah and Mike*

Sarah and Mike have been married for three years. Mike just concluded four years of working for The Upper Room Community Church as the audio visual director and creative staging designer. Mike "grew up in a non-denominational church in Vancouver, BC. Well before my time there, it was originally a Brethren church with some strong traditions (women's head coverings, etc). Thankfully, Sutherland Church had moved beyond that into a more relaxed church structure. I had very little life outside of the folks at Sutherland, which was partly good, and partly not so

---

<sup>30</sup> David Wagner, admissions counselor, St. Olaf college.

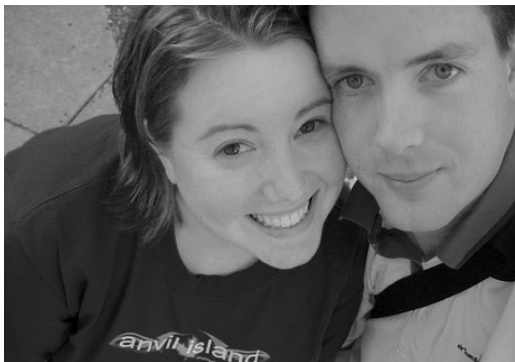
<sup>31</sup> Gustavus website, Retrieved October 28, 2007: <http://gustavus.edu/diversity/report/recommendations.cfm>



good. We lived in a bubble. My friends and I were young and church life was our existence for the most part.” Sarah grew up in the Lutheran church. “I come from a long line of ELCA Lutheran pastors. Even though the pastor bug skipped my dad’s generation, I still grew up in an environment where church was basically life. We were as involved as you could possibly be at church without actually working for the church. My family attended everything and volunteered for everything. For most of my childhood I was even under the impressions that my family was “famous” at church. Weird huh?”

Through cross denominational organizations, Sarah began to experience different styles of worship. “My openness to other denominations and worship styles was mostly brought on by college church-type group experiences. I found the Lutheran services on Sundays and daily chapel at Gustavus to be filled with great music, but generally dry and dull. I became involved in a handful of other groups such as Proclaim, a student-led worship service. It was as if a whole new world was opened to me of different ways to connect with God. It was exciting and also confusing to know which way was ‘my way’ when I began to experience different churchy environments and compare them to my ELCA home.”

But finding a church that fits both of them has been a trial. While searching for a place to worship that suits both of their needs, the need for church itself has come into question. Mike writes, “Presently, I continue to struggle with what church is. Is it really important? Is it something I want to go to? I think that going to church is just good practice. It won't necessarily change you on its own, but over the course of time, if being driven by the right motivation, can be incredibly healthy and life-giving (much like exercise and healthy eating).” He later added, “I do know that



finding a church seems to be an uphill battle trying to find the right fit for both of us. I think we internally are hoping and longing for the ‘perfect fit’ of church, but I really don't think it's going to happen. Much like the way we both kind of want this awesome personal faith, but aren't finding it. I begin to wonder if we're mentally on the wrong track; if we're looking at this through the wrong lens. Like any relationship, sometimes it's not the best fit, or the most ideal, but you want it to exist, so you work

hard at it. I think if we really wanted ‘church’ we'd have to work hard at it... we just live in a time and culture where we expect it to be done for us by the time we walk through the door.”

Sarah recognized her wonderings of the importance of the church after trying to talk about church with co-workers. “I realized about a year ago that I was for the first time in my life in a work situation where talking about church was uncomfortable. Since my husband Michael worked for a church it occasionally came up in conversation and I realized that my new manager would stiffen up every time it was mentioned. Since then I've noticed it's not something that's easy to talk about with my coworkers. Most are in their 20s and 30s and I noticed that a huge number are living with a long time boyfriend or girlfriend but not married. I've asked a few why they haven't decided to get married yet and the standard response is ‘Why should I’ To them marriage is rather irrelevant, just like church. I'm not sure if it's the time of life or the culture shift or if it's any different than it really was

a generation or two ago. It makes me wonder, 'Is the American church irrelevant?' Is that something we should worry about? Most days it makes me worried, but other perhaps more cynical or perhaps more enlightened days I realize that maybe it is better that way. Because as I said in the question before, the church isn't really the institution or the Sunday service, it's the community of people. It's the conversations and decisions and the way we support and celebrate with each other. I'm not sure if that's the first thing people think of when they hear the phrase American church. And in that way the American church by way of the Sunday church service has been a little irrelevant to us in our marriage because we realize we probably won't find exactly what we're looking for."

This has been a difficult time for Sarah and Mike as they search for the place where they might both feel at home. Sarah has been visiting with a counselor for a while, discussing these very issues of faith, their place in the church and her relationship with God. "I told him about my life long struggle to be 'on fire for God' and truly form a 'personal relationship with Jesus.' I went on quite an emotional rant about how I have never felt secure in whether I was really going to Heaven, and if I was even on the right path, and what were we going to do if/when we had children, and what about if/when we move, and, and, and! In fact I went on about pretty much everything, which is what I do when I get emotional, or, as emotional people like me like to call it, 'passionate.' Tom sat back in his chair and was quiet for a bit. He looked at me and said, 'What if you never find it? Maybe your search for the way you connect with God is your faith journey.' I realized that every time I go to a new church or a new Bible study it's like I'm on a blind date with God. Maybe this will be the time when I receive some sort of enlightenment. Maybe this will be when it all clicks. Who knows? So now I'm learning to accept that this may in fact be my faith journey rather than the journey to my faith, and the more I talk with people about it the more I realize that I'm not alone.

Doug Pagitt, pastor at Solomon's Porch, a church with mostly 20-somethings writes, "Rather than seeing Christianity as a belief we acquire in a completed form, we ought to enter into it with the understanding that we are at the beginning of a life-long process of discovery and change. Ours is a faith that is lived, from beginning to end."<sup>32</sup>

### **PART THREE: How the church responds**

The following paragraphs will explore some creative ideas many church leaders have suggested the church consider in light of our changing times. This section will not give specific quick-fixes, or even a five-step plan to ensure successful ministry to postmoderns. God moves in different ways and it is only through conversation, experience and prayer that a particular congregation will hear where God is leading them. However, in the paragraphs to follow there are some new ideas that may help get the conversation started. We'll start by acknowledging the natural intersections between postmodernism and the Christian faith.

---

<sup>32</sup> Pagitt, Church Re-imagined, 25.

Then we'll look closely at a movement called the Emerging Church, a group of Christians who are very intentionally doing church in a new way. The conclusion of this paper hopes to spark a conversation calling for an intentional return of the priesthood of all believers and a call for unity and recognition of common beliefs within the entire church. It is my hope that these paragraphs will simply be a catalyst for you and your congregation to explore as you listen for where God is leading you in this new time.

### *Postmodernism and the Christian Faith*

When looking at Christianity through a postmodern lens, there are values that postmoderns hold that the church embodies. Postmodernism appreciates mystery and there are few things as mysterious as a savior dying and raising from the dead in order to save the world. Postmoderns value community over the individual, and we have been called to love and serve our neighbor. Beauty is appreciated, and our God created this beautiful creation and beautiful people who fill the earth to be creative beings. Authenticity is valued more than polished perfection which is perhaps the best news for the church since we're made up of a bunch of sinners anyway.

### *Mystery*

Fed up with pat answers, I believe many people are sick of the comprehensible, over-simplified story of God's love that has been shared in too many churches. God's love is simple: it is for you and for me. But there is a lot to our Christian story that is not simple, rather very complicated with a lot to think about and chew on with unanswered questions that we will never be able to answered this side of heaven. For the rational thinker, systematic theology becomes a great source for better understanding and working through the parts of this story that are left untold. But for the postmodern, the mysterious is more appealing. McLaren writes, "This sense of mystery may offend our rationalistic minds that demand, if not signs, thorough explanations. But the mystery itself is part of the message. We can assume if God wanted it clearer, he would have made it clearer."<sup>33</sup>

I remember the season of my life when I realized that I did not want a God that I could comprehend. It left me feeling really confused and small. Yet I felt peace in knowing that the God who created this whole thing, the God who I have put my trust in my whole

---

<sup>33</sup> McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 153.

life is actually just that grand and glorious. In all the unanswered questions, I found peace and trust because it was then that I truly recognized that I am not as great as God. That fact is humbling, comforting and very believable. Stanley Grenz explains, “The Christian faith entails a denial that the rational, scientific method is the sole measure of truth. We affirm that certain aspects of truth lie beyond reason and cannot be fathomed by reason.”<sup>34</sup>

### *Community*

Tired of individualism and personal success, there is a yearning today for deep friendships, genuine relationships and true community. Grenz urges the church, “We must take seriously the discoveries of contemporary communitarians. They are echoing the great biblical theme that the goal of God’s program is the establishment of community in the highest sense.”<sup>35</sup> We were created to be people of community as this desire for genuine relationships comes directly from God. “Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships.”<sup>36</sup> My favorite quote is by Fredrick Buechner and describes perfectly the intersection between community and the call of the church. “Drawing on nothing fancier than the poetry of our own life, let us use words and images that help make the surface of our lives transparent to the truth of who we are and who God is and the Gospel of our meeting.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Authenticity*

Living in community then calls for a new kind of honesty and authenticity. There have been too many exalted church leaders who have fallen in the worst way. A few times a year church leaders make headlines, and it is often for shameful things, such as child molestation or adultery. As already noted, there is an overall skepticism within postmoderns of people who are a bit too smooth and polished. In response to too many smooth talkers, men and women that come across as real, honest, transparent, vulnerable and genuine are viewed as the leaders and have the opportunity to lead the church in authentic ways. Robert

---

<sup>34</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 166.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Buechner, F. (1977). *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*. New York: Harper Collins.

Webber writes, “People come to faith not because they see the logic of the argument, but because they have experienced a welcoming God in a hospitable and loving community.”<sup>38</sup> This is good news for us. It means that as a follower of Jesus, a person does not have to know the best way to answer every question. It means that you don’t have to have special education to reach out to another. It does mean that you have to be vulnerable and honest, to quit trying to be perfect. Authenticity is important for all Christians, but especially key for leaders.

### *Beauty*

Postmoderns seek original, creative beauty. Beauty, then, is not something that only skilled artists can create, or deem beautiful. Beauty is found in the genuine relationship, in the honest, vulnerable leader, in the artwork of the untrained artist. Art, creation, music, and helping relationships all become the source for seeing God among us, in the beauty that we have been generously surrounded by. So what do all of these things lead us to? Church refocused in a new way, or perhaps an old-new way.

Imagine this: You walk into a room filled with couches set up in clusters all facing the middle of the room. On the coffee tables between the couches there is bread and wine. Local art fills the wall of the room like one great gallery lit by candles. This is a sanctuary.

Picture this: You walk into your typical sanctuary at night, but all of the windows have been covered with dark drapes, hundreds of candles cover the altar. The big screens are used, but they are rotating through ancient Christian art, some icons, some Michelangelo. There is a band up front and as it begins to play the words come up on the big screen and you know the song. It is Holy, Holy, Holy. The lights come up a bit and now you can see that the room is packed with 20-somethings singing, “Lord God Almighty, Blessed Trinity.” You know this sanctuary can hold 1500 bodies, and there are people standing in every aisle and behind the pews, unable to find a seat.

And now think about this: You find a new coffee house that is close to your bus station. The coffee is fantastic and you’re impressed with the friendly staff. The seating area doubles as an art gallery and concert venue for local artists. As you pay for your cup of brew you are invited to come back Sunday night for the coffee house church service.

---

<sup>38</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 72.

These three churches are well-attended by 20-somethings who were looking for a place to belong. Each church is so different. I hope your creative juices are beginning to flow. Churches all across the country are trying to be conducive to the times, while not selling out to the cultural fads of the day. One group, the Emerging Church has formed, becoming a leader in talking about the rock solid, never changing 2000-year-old message we have been given to share our the changing time the church finds itself in today.

### *The Emerging Church*

An exciting conversation has been in process for the past several years among church leaders and lay members from all over the world discussing what church might look like in this new time.<sup>39</sup> Fully aware of the large drop out rate of 20 and 30 somethings, this group began to look critically at culture. It is called the emerging church and was formed out of response to this postmodern time.

The Emerging Church movement crosses all denominations, and consists of groups of church leaders intentionally mixing the times with the gospel we've been given. There are critics to this movement, claiming that the theology is becoming too relativistic, too closely mirroring postmodernism instead of standing in opposition to its pluralistic tendencies.<sup>40</sup> Whether or not these claims are true, there is much we can learn from this movement's imagination, as it creatively engages the culture.

All three of the churches described above are in the Minneapolis area and would fit the definition of Emerging Churches. The first, Solomon's Porch<sup>41</sup>, has become a beautiful role model on how to live out Christian community all seven days of the week. The second church described, The Upper Room Community<sup>42</sup>, is meeting a need that is in such high demand that the church now holds two services on Sunday nights, and both are standing room only. The congregation is largely 20-somethings who have been raised in the church in all different denominations. The third church is called The Beat Coffeehouse<sup>43</sup>, located in the heart of Uptown. The pastor who runs this coffee house is great friends with one of the

---

<sup>39</sup> The Emerging Church, Part One July 8, 2005, PBS Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week845/cover.html> Retrieved September 23, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> McGrath, S. Retrieved October 19, 2007 from <http://smcgrath.wordpress.com/category/emerging-church/>

McGrath writes scathing entries in opposition to the Emerging Church. It is worth reading.

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.solomonsporch.com/>

<sup>42</sup> See <http://www.upperroomcommunity.org/>

<sup>43</sup> See <http://thebeatcoffee.com>.

cities top coffee roasters who spends most of his time creating custom blends for high end restaurants and grocery stores. These two began to dream outside of the box, wondering how they could bring church to the people rather than waiting for the people to come to the church.

This is an exciting time, with Christians using the imagination they have been given and with passion and enthusiasm, rethinking how to be the church. “Emerging catches into one term the global reshaping of how to ‘do church’ in postmodern culture. It has no central offices, and it is as varied as evangelicalism itself.”<sup>44</sup>

There are nine tenants that the Emerging Church holds to. The following is a definition given by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses nine practices. Emerging churches: 1) identify with the life of Jesus 2) transform the secular realm 3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they 4) welcome the stranger 5) serve with generosity 6) participate as producers 7) create as created beings 8) lead as a body 9) take part in spiritual activities.<sup>45</sup>

You may read this list as a life-long Christian and think nothing is too new on this list. These have been the beliefs of the church forever. And you’re right. But not all of those words have been lived out like they have been believed in. The Emerging church is hopeful to take those 9 practices and do just that – live them out with intentionality and grace.

There are three characteristics of the emerging church that I believe are attractive to the 20-somethings of our time: intentional living, a welcoming of many opinions and life perspectives, and an appreciation of worship that gracefully blends ancient practices with present-day style.

### Intentional Living

Scott McKnight is a professor at North Park in Chicago, a Covenant college and seminary. He has written many helpful articles and books on this movement, adding to the conversation of how we can best be church in this time.

“A notable emphasis of the emerging movement is orthopraxy, that is, right living. The contention is that *how a person lives* is more important than *what he or she believes*. Many will immediately claim that we need both or that orthopraxy flows from

---

<sup>44</sup> McKnight, S. (2007). *Five Streams of the Emerging Church*, Christianity Today. Retrieved May 2, 2007 from <http://www.ctlibrary.com/40534>

<sup>45</sup> Definition of Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger in *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*.

orthodoxy. Most in the emerging movement agree we need both, but they contest the second claim: Experience does not prove that those who *believe* the right things *live* the right way.”<sup>46</sup>

I believe this value stems directly in response to too many fallen church leaders, men and women who have preached one thing, and been caught behaving exactly opposite of what they have been preaching. A call for transparency and authenticity of all believers, and to live in accordance to ones beliefs are the result of these too frequent church scandals.

### Welcoming all voices into a journey

Another notable characteristic of the Emerging Church is their openness to hearing many voices and opinions without having to come to a strong conclusion or right answer. “The emerging movement loves ideas and theology. It just doesn't have an airtight system or statement of faith. We believe the Great Tradition offers various ways for telling the truth about God's redemption in Christ, but we don't believe any one theology gets it absolutely right.”<sup>47</sup> “Emergents espouse an open, flexible, and subjective view of doctrine in which they embrace a continual reexamination of theology which causes them to see faith as a journey rather than a destination.”<sup>48</sup> Along with this journey of faith, comes a frustration from hearing so much of the Bible used as evidence to further ones own argument. Pagitt writes,

“Perhaps we have been propagating a limited message, reducing biblical authors to sound bytes that cut the gospel message into so many pieces that we are left with little more than statements of what we believe rather than the broader story of how we are to enter into God's story through a life lived in faith.”<sup>49</sup>

### Ancient-Future Worship

Drawing on many different traditions and practices of the past, worship looks and feels different, yet familiar. Robert Webber has categorized the changes we have seen in worship into three historical groups in his book, *The Younger Evangelicals*. His three groups are Traditional Evangelicals, Pragmatic Evangelicals and Younger Evangelicals.<sup>50</sup> Webber believes Traditional Evangelicals emerged after WWII and functioned as the dominant evangelical image until about 1975. Pragmatic Evangelicals is the next phase of

---

<sup>46</sup> McKnight, *Streams of Living Water*, online.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. online.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. online.

<sup>49</sup> Pagitt, *Church Re-imagined*, 31

<sup>50</sup> Webber, R. (2002). *The Younger Evangelicals*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 16.



Evangelicalism birthing as a response to the 1960's defined largely by the church growth movement. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, a new group has emerged, the Younger Evangelicals.<sup>51</sup> Webber believes the worship style breaks down as follows: The Traditional Evangelicals strived to maintain the tradition of their particular denomination; Pragmatic Evangelicals broke away from the past to introduced chorus-driven worship; Younger Evangelicals converge all traditions of worship into a very thoughtful blending of high and low styles, contemporary and traditional.<sup>52</sup> And while intentionally choosing bits and pieces from our diverse histories of worship within the church, they question why and how each thing is done and if it could be done differently, while still remaining faithful to the purpose of worship.

“They ask these sorts of questions: Is the sermon the most important thing on Sunday morning? If we sat in a circle would we foster a different theology and praxis? If we lit incense, would we practice our prayers differently? If we put the preacher on the same level as the congregation, would we create a clearer sense of the priesthood of all believers? If we acted out what we believe, would we encounter more emphatically the Incarnation?”<sup>53</sup>

The Emerging Church movement is not the defining answer to how we are to be the church for the 20 and 30 somethings of today. To think that all churches should completely change what they are doing is a bit unrealistic. But I hope that by painting a picture of the emerging church, eyes have been opened to the creative movement God is making among his people. And that there are probably many questions that should be asked in your own congregation. Why have we always done it this way? And if we have a great reason as to why, do the men and women sitting in our pews each Sunday understand why we do things the way we do? Are there times within the service when we can explain the history and roots from where specific rituals and rites come from? Are there ways that our church can become less leader-focused, with the work of the church spread throughout its members?

#### *A proposal for the Priesthood of all believers*

The importance of community for this next generation cannot be stressed enough. Deep friendships are treasured and to find someone or some place where you can openly share your doubts, fears and shortcomings is rare. As the church, we can be that place. We

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>53</sup> McKnight, *Five Streams of the Emerging Church*, online

are admittedly a place for broken people, only made whole through Jesus. And yet, how our brokenness becomes beauty is still so mysterious that a community of honest questioning, wrestling and openness is really attractive. We are called to wrestle and question the bigger theological issues as a community. Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch, writes,

“The work of theology must happen in full community. Of course it must include the ideas of those who have come before us, but to simply accept the work of our forebears in the faith as the end of the conversations is to outsource the real work of thinking, and that turns theology into a stagnant philosophy rather than an active pursuit of how we are to live God's story in our time.”<sup>54</sup>

A fruit of wrestling with hard questions within a faithful community is that everyone is invited to share their own stories and experiences, giving value to the beliefs of the members of the community as much as the pastor. The community itself holds value, each individual has something to bring, not just the pastor. Decentralized authority is more appealing, as it invites more voices to the conversation. Pagitt continues, “The dialogical approach means that the authority of teaching and explanation needs to be decentralized away from me as the pastor both in the pulpit and during the week.”<sup>55</sup> The value of the pastor is not diminished, but the value of the body is increased. This is good news for all involved in the church. Pagitt confesses,

“As a pastor, it's such a blessing to not be seen as the ‘Bible Answer Man,’ but as a member of the community, one who happens to have training, gifts, and a degree in theology. I believe the freedom in not having to have all the answers can free a pastor from feeling like they need to know everything and lead them to a place of genuineness, walking right beside their community, in the midst of the struggle.”<sup>56</sup>

All of this builds a case for the priesthood of all believers. Every one of us has been given direct access to God, and the Christmas and Easter worshiper has the same access as the life-long pastor. Norman Nagel in *Luther and the Priesthood of all Believers* writes,

“There is no ‘two-level’ Church, with clergy above and laity below, or laity above (who hires and fires) and clergy below, or two churches, one visible and the other invisible. There are no levels-only where our Lord has put himself there for us to give out his saving, enlivening gifts as he has ordained the Means of Grace to do.”<sup>57</sup>

To think of a place with “no levels” is almost hard to imagine in a world full of hierarchy, classes and social groups. We love to place people in boxes and compare others to

---

<sup>54</sup> Pagitt, *Church Re-imagined*, 218.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>57</sup> *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium* [Prelude concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the church], Weimar Ausgabe 6, 564.6-14 as quoted in Norman Nagel, "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61 (October 1997) 4:283-84. Retrieved October 17, 2007 from <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/420>

ourselves. It is human nature. But the priesthood of all believers is a belief that each person has something unique to offer, not just the ordained leaders and that no one person is more important than another. Martin Luther introduced the concept of the Priesthood of all Believers in response to the hierarchical church of his day that he felt was giving certain roles to some Christians and not to others. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he writes how every Christian by virtue of their own baptism has “been given the authority to speak the Word and baptize people and even be the leader at the Communion Table.”<sup>58</sup> Luther wrote in response to the hierarchy of power,

If they recognize this they would know that they have no right to exercise power over us (in what has not been committed to them) except insofar as we may have granted it to them, for thus it says in 1 Peter 2, ‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom.’ In this way we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. There are indeed priests whom we call ministers. They are chosen from among us, and who do everything in our name. That is a priesthood which is nothing else than the Ministry. Thus 1 Corinthians 4:1: ‘No one should regard us as anything else than ministers of Christ and dispensers of the mysteries of God.’<sup>59</sup>

The priesthood of all believers is not a new concept. But somehow I do believe throughout the time of denominationalism and the rise of church structure and hierarchy, we have slipped back into a dependence on bishops, synods, pastors and other leaders to get things done within a congregation or denomination. In a postmodern time when many are skeptical of authority anyway, combined with the growing distrust of people with too much power, the value of the priesthood of all believers can open a new conversation.

And the conversation is exciting. It changes a lot of things. It means that we have to start seeing each other as ministers and priests in a hurting world, valuing the gifts and uniqueness’ and individual opportunities and experiences of every person.

The church must be a place where questions can be asked, hard conversations had, with an excitement to get the good news out the door and into the world by the work of every set of legs that walked into that church. It means that the church does not remain solely a place for personal faith development, but rather a place for men and women to be empowered, equipped and sent out to their daily lives as ministers, sharing the kingdom of God with their co-workers, family and each part of their life. Kelly Fryer writes,

“If the church is people who spend most of their time *out there*, having to make it up as they go along, then when we are *in here*, together, we need to help each other

---

<sup>58</sup>Fryer, K. (2006). *Reclaiming the “C” Word*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress. 64.

<sup>59</sup> Nagel, "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers" 284.

make sure we are ready for the job. That means helping each other see ourselves the way God sees us, as people with amazing gifts that are just waiting to be put to use for the sake of the world.”<sup>60</sup>

And just like that, the playing field is leveled. We each have gifts to give and to share and together we make up one holy priesthood, following our one and only leader, Jesus Christ.

### *Call to Unity*

*How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing even life forevermore.*  
*Psalm 133*

It is out of the recognition that we have one leader, one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that I'd like to open a discussion about the unity of the church. For the various reasons already mentioned, denominational lines are blurring, and in this postmodern time the lines that once divided religions and gods are also blurring. Because of the second part of this statement, I believe a call for Kingdom unity is needed. That call would be for each part of the church to recognize the whole body of Christ, to emphasize Christian core beliefs and to examine the strengths of other denominations.

It should be mentioned that I am not against denominations and do not hope that we become one church that denies our various traditions and theological particularities. I know there are many Lutherans who would feel uncomfortable worshiping in an Assemblies of God church, and vice versa. I believe God uses each denomination to create a space for different people who worship in different ways and to uphold each denomination's doctrinal beliefs. I do hope, however, that one day each denomination may be able to look at one another and instead of making quips about one denomination's chronic use of the organ, or another denomination's raising hands during praise music, we would instead recognize the beauty in our diversity and be grateful that God can be worshiped so many different ways and each participate uniquely in God's mission in the world.

We are called to unity, not uniformity. A call for unity does not mean that we will all become the same in our beliefs or how we view our faith or our relationship to Jesus. C.S. Lewis writes,

“Christianity thinks of human individuals not as mere members of a group or items in a list, but as organs in a body—different from one another and each contributing

---

<sup>60</sup> Fryer, *Reclaiming the C Word*, 68).

what no other could. When you find yourself wanting to turn your children, or pupils, or even your neighbors into people exactly like yourself, remember that God probably never meant them to be that. You and they are different organs, intended to do different things.”<sup>61</sup>

This call for unity does not mean all churches need to function the same. In a recent article on the Reformed Church in America website, Sioux Falls Pastor Roger Leistra was interviewed about the fast growth his congregation saw after they added a second service. The second service took on a personality of its own and attracted a very different group of people than the first service. The church now has two very distinct worship services each Sunday morning, but somehow the church feels more whole and united than ever before. "What is unique about Community Reformed is that the entire church celebrates this diversity. Everyone sees the value of what each group needs. The spiritual power of our unity is not the 'sameness' we share but the variety we celebrate."<sup>62</sup> Those last two lines are rather poignant. *Everyone sees the value of what each group needs. The spiritual power of our unity is not in the sameness we share but the variety we celebrate.* Can we begin to imagine what this would look like, and how exciting this would feel if the Christian church began to celebrate the variety that we share? Webber writes,

“This search for a common heritage allows for the emergence of a new understanding of unity and diversity. Unity is based on what is passed down in the ecclesio-social culture of the universal church, whereas diversity is a particular understanding of the faith that reflects the specific cultural context in which it was expressed.”<sup>63</sup>

I worked for a Christian singer my first year out of college. We traveled on a bus around the country, stopping each day at a different church in a different state. What I loved most about that year was seeing the kingdom at work, in all different denominations of churches in all different states. Each church had its own struggles and joys. I remember as I lay in my bunk one night as we pulled out of one church parking lot to drive all night on our way to the next church and thinking, “God is moving in this Baptist church, just like he is moving in that United Methodist church we were in last night, and that Covenant church in Chicago...” This was exciting for me, a Lutheran pastor’s kid, Lutheran college grad, Lutheran camper and camp counselor. I got more and more excited about the whole church, the whole body of Christ, the holy catholic and apostolic church that worships one God.

---

<sup>61</sup> Lewis, C.S. (1952) *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins. 145.

<sup>62</sup> Reformed Church in America. “Spiritual Power Shows through Worship Diversity” Retrieved October 20, 2007 from <http://www.rca.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?&pid=3421&srcid=2188>

<sup>63</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 17.

Doug Pagitt echos these sentiments, “I wish that we could spend time in each other’s worlds and worship in each other’s places. Maybe then we would have eyes to see and ears to hear what God has been saying to one another’s churches.”<sup>64</sup>

The people of God, found in all different denominations, have a lot in common with one another. At the core, the story is the same. The foundation of our belief in a God who loved the world so much that he sent his son to die for ALL of us is the same. There are plenty of things to divide us in our beliefs, different doctrines, different theologies and interpretations. But the time has come to recognize that in that Catholic church they are loving and worshiping the same Jesus that the Orthodox church down the road is praying to, and the Assemblies of God church is singing praises to, and the Lutheran church preaching about. It’s the same Jesus.

### **CONCLUSION: The Glorious Kingdom of God**

*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13*

*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. John 17:20-23*

God created us to be a people of community, loving and caring for one another. It doesn’t take too long to realize that we were all born very different, and there are times when our command to love one another is really a difficult task. But Jesus has called his people to love each other and work with one another to bring the Kingdom of God, sharing our gifts and strengths.

What excites me the very most, then, is all that we have to offer one another. Each church has strengths and weaknesses, and I believe each church could learn a lot from the other churches that are in their city or town. Richard Foster is a well-known author for having penned *The Celebration of Discipline*. Perhaps lesser known, but just as inspired, he helped found an organization called RENOVARÉ. The front page of the RENOVARÉ website proclaims the following:

---

<sup>64</sup> Pagitt, *Church Re-imagined*, 82.

“God is breaking down the old walls that separate and isolate us. We are being enabled to listen and learn and draw strength from each other in ways that have not been possible for a very long time. RENOVARÉ seeks to follow this powerful movement of the Spirit of God by bringing together the best spiritual treasures of several great Christian streams of faith and witness. This balanced vision of gospel truths gives vigor and wholeness to our lives. We believe it is the work of God.”<sup>65</sup>

The website has many helpful resources to facilitate such a conversation. The book that I found the most helpful is Foster’s publication entitled, “Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith.” The book looks at six streams of faith, recognizes leaders, reports on common teachings and the strength each stream has to offer the others. Foster’s argument is that we each come from one or more of these streams, but much would be gained if we each spent time learning from all six streams.<sup>66</sup>

The six streams are: The Contemplative tradition, or prayer-filled; The Holiness tradition, or the virtuous life; The Charismatic Tradition, or the Spirit-empowered life; The Social Justice Tradition, or the compassionate life; The Evangelical Tradition, or the Word-centered life; The Incarnational Tradition, or the sacramental life.<sup>67</sup> As I read through the book, I quickly recognized the streams from which I come from, The Social Justice Tradition and The Incarnational Tradition. I would guess most Lutherans would find themselves in these streams with me. And I was also able to recognize the streams from which my Pentecostal husband grew up in, The Charismatic Tradition and Evangelical Tradition. Foster’s argument is that we would all do well to recognize where we come from and to take time to learn about the other streams as these streams are already joining together. “The astonishing new reality in this mighty flow of the Spirit is how sovereignly God is bringing together streams of life that have been isolated from one another for a very long time.”<sup>68</sup>

The three couples introduced in this paper are evidence of God’s gathering his people in an all-inclusive community. These couples are all beginning a life-long process of discovery in understanding one another’s beliefs and upbringings. I am inspired and encouraged by their comfort with the conversation and willingness to be a part of the kingdom story. John Bush and Patrick Cooney are Presbyterian pastors and authors of the

---

<sup>65</sup> See [www.renovare.org](http://www.renovare.org)

<sup>66</sup> Foster, R. (1998). *Streams of Living water*. San Francisco, California: HarperCollins, xvi.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

book, *Interchurch Families, Resources for Ecumenical Hope*. In this book they express the hope these couples are for the whole church, “Interchurch families are a gift both for our churches and for the whole Church of Jesus Christ. The creativity and longing for a unity that can be visibly manifest, often expressed by members of such families, can serve as a witness to the whole Church”<sup>69</sup> The three couples interviewed are a glimpse of the kind of unity I am hopeful for. “When ecumenical couples seek an ever-deeper response to God’s love and grace, they may discover that they are particularly situated to answer Christ’s prayer for unity. By their very relationship to each other and their presence to other Christians, they can become agents of change and promoters of Christian unity.”<sup>70</sup>

With these young couples as our helpful visuals of what this unity can look like, it is time we recognize the importance of these 20-somethings and create a church community that engages them for the benefit of the unified church. All denominations, through the increase of these cross-denominational unions, will soon find themselves joining in the same conversation, acknowledging our diversity while recognizing the unity we share in the blood of Christ, shed for the whole people of God. So let us move forward as the people of God sent into the world with the same message: This good news is for every single soul and calls us into beautiful community with one another.

---

<sup>69</sup> Bush, J. & Cooney, P (2002). *Interchurch families*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 10.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



## Bibliography

- "American Religious Identification Survey," by The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, at:  
[http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_studies/aris.pdf](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/aris.pdf)
- "Study finds number of Protestants is falling," Houston Chronicle, 2004-JUL-21. Posted on the Free Republic bulletin board at: <http://www.freerepublic.com/>
- Alford, C. Postdenominationalism, Baptist Press, Retrieved May 4, 2007 from <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/8255.htm>
- B.A. Robinson, Trends Among Christians in the U.S. Retrieved 2007, July 1 from: [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_tren.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_tren.htm)
- Buechner, F. (1977). Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale. New York: Harper Collins.
- Bush, J. & Cooney, P (2002). Interchurch families. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Chang, P. (2004, August 17) ELCA Reports Marked Membership Decline Retrieved 2007, September 27 from [http://www.christianpost.com/article/20040817/2875\\_ELCA\\_Reports\\_Marked\\_Membership\\_Decline.htm](http://www.christianpost.com/article/20040817/2875_ELCA_Reports_Marked_Membership_Decline.htm)
- Collection of News and Articles on Generation Y. Retrieved October 20, 2007 from <http://www.gen-y.org/>
- De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium [Prelude concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the church], Weimar Ausgabe 6, 564.6-14 as quoted in Norman Nagel, "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers," Concordia Theological Quarterly 61 (October 1997) 4:283-84. Retrieved October 17, 2007 from <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/420>
- Ellison Research. (2007, February 8). One-third of all churchgoers have less than full loyalty to their church. Facts and Trends, Retrieved 2007, May 1 from <http://www.ellisonresearch.com/releases/20070208.htm>
- Foster, R. (1998). Streams of Living water. San Francisco, California: HarperCollins.
- Fryer, K. (2006). Reclaiming the "C" Word. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.
- Grenz, S. (1996). A Primer on Postmodernism. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.
- Hoge, D. and O'Connor, T. (Spring 2004) Denominational identity from age sixteen to age thirty-eight. Sociology of Religion Retrieved May 1, 2007 from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0SOR/is\\_1\\_65/ai\\_n6141812](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_1_65/ai_n6141812)

- Kimball, D. (2003). *The Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Lewis, C.S. (1952) *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins.
- LifeWay News Service. (2007, February 8). LifeWay Survey Examines Church, Denominational Loyalty. Retrieved April 2007 from <http://www.lifeway.com>
- Mainline Protestants: Churches at a crossroads. Retrieved 2007, September 27 from <http://www.thejournalnews.com/mainline/>
- McGrath, S. Retrieved October 19, 2007 from <http://smcgrath.wordpress.com/category/emerging-church/>
- McKnight, S. (2007). *Five Streams of the Emerging Church*, Christianity Today. Retrieved May 2, 2007 from <http://www.ctlibrary.com/40534>
- McLaren, B. (1998). *The Church on the Other Side*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Pagitt, D. (2005). *Church Re-imagined*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Reformed Church in America. "Spiritual Power Shows through Worship Diversity" Retrieved October 20, 2007 from <http://www.rca.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?&pid=3421&srcid=2188>
- Satterwhite, S. Beliefnet. Why Can't We Commit? Retrieved on 2007, October 31 from: [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/46/story\\_4603\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/46/story_4603_1.html)
- The Emerging Church, Part One July 8, 2005, PBS Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week845/cover.html> Retrieved September 23, 2007.
- Webber, R. (2002). *The Younger Evangelicals*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Webber, R. (2006). *Ancient Future Faith*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books.