

# **The Emerging Church: Characteristics and Typology - The Case of Ikon**

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## **Abstract**

The “Emerging Church” constitutes an innovating, controversial and somewhat misunderstood “new” Christian movement that has emerged largely in Protestant circles, although almost exclusively in predominantly Western or “westernized” societies. It is many things: a generational revolution, a theological and organizational critique of conventional Christianity in post-modernity, an art form, a philosophical tendency and a fresh mode of evangelism. This paper presents an exploration of what the Emergent Church amounts to by way of its major characteristics and seeks to establish a workable typology. The paper argues that while the movement can be understood as a means by which a distinct Christian constituency has attempted to forge a juxtaposition with post-modernity, the arrival of the Emerging Church also marks the culmination of various discernible trends and has some identifiable historical antecedence. This paper constitutes a “work in progress”, focusing primarily on one expression of the Emerging Church based in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

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## **Emerging Tendencies of the Emerging Church**

“Does your faith lie in the hope that heaven is full of people like you?”  
(Ikon web-site)

While the Emerging Church (alternatively known as the “Emerging Church movement”<sup>1</sup> and also colloquially as “emergents”) would seem to be a twenty-first century post-modern phenomenon, its roots are perhaps discernible in the late 1980s and possibly earlier. Those who subscribe to the various expressions of the Emerging Church frequently attend local independent churches, “house churches”, or loosely-bounded “meetings” or “gatherings” that consciously identify with the movement. Such groupings may plausibly be understood as “pure” expressions of the movement. Others are derived from factions within the mainline Christian denominations. If a generalization can be made regarding this distinction, then the former, which constitute the focus of this paper, display more innovating independent and radically

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<sup>1</sup>“Emergent” is sometimes more closely identified with the Emergent Village and the writings of Brian McLaren, a former English professor who is the pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church and itinerant speaker. Those participants in the movement who assert this distinction believe Emergent Village to be a part of the Emerging Church movement but prefer to use the term “Emerging Church” to refer to the movement in its entirety, while using the term “emergent” in a more limited way. Many of those within the Emerging Church movement who do not closely identify with Emergent Village tend to avoid the organization's interest in radical theological reformulation and focus more on new ways of “doing church” and expressing their spirituality with the more subtle and diverse articulation of the movement in the UK, Australia and New Zealand over a longer period of time. These variations in all things “emerging” indicate the movement’s increasing fragmentation, see Kreider (2001).

different manifestations of “the Church”, while the latter includes evangelising or “mission”-focused groups within the established denominations. The distinction, however, remains an unsatisfactory one since the independent groupings also tend to be mission orientated, while denominational representations may innovate and experiment in the cause of mission.

At first glance it appears that the “emergents” are engaging in a complete re-invention or “re-imagining” of Christianity accompanied by a drastic redefinition of the faith’s conventional teachings, praxis and terminology. Yet “emergents” do not constitute a coherent and unified movement as the above distinction suggests. Indeed, the designation “movement” (and that of “Church”) is something of a misnomer given the fragmentation, global dispersion, varied expressions and cultural nuances.<sup>2</sup> This complexity is enhanced by how “emergents” subjectively designate their cause. Participants have alternatively referred to themselves as “postmodern”, “post-conservative”, “post-liberal”, “post-evangelical”, and even “post-Protestant” Christians. In whichever way the preface “post” is employed, it nevertheless indicates a sweeping departure from standard forms of the faith.

The Emerging Church has no one leader, central authority or organisation.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons and because of its very nature, the Emerging Church would appear to almost defy a succinct definition and this has subsequently led to a great deal of confusion as to what the movement actually is. Indeed, Scot McKnight, professor of religious studies at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago and self-confessed theologian for the movement, suggests that the major expressions of the Emerging Church have become the subject of stereotyping to the point that it has become almost an urban legend (McKnight 2007). McKnight nonetheless attempts to collapse the orientations of Emerging churches into one conceptualization and describes them as “the global reshaping of how to ‘do church’ in postmodern culture”. In that sense the Emerging Church renders a “fresh expression” of Christianity; “fresh expression” being yet another depiction of the movement. Similarly, Gibbs and Bolger, in their sympathetic volume on the topic, define the various strands as “communities that practice the way of Jesus Christ within postmodern culture” (Gibbs and Bolger 2005: 1). McKnight telling states that the Emerging Church is not the only group of Christians engaging in what the “emergents” are participating in, but that through them a number of ideas and practices are crystallizing into something more coherent in the forms of a broad global movement (McKnight 2007).

A definition of the Emerging Church must necessarily range wider than that offered by the more congenial appraisal. While orientation, practices and even core doctrines (such as they exist) vary considerably within the movement’s “conversation” (to use its prevailing terminology), most emerging “streams” (frequently referred to as “cohorts”) tend to exhibit certain “in group” characteristics. Precisely what these characteristics are remains hard to delimit since not all ‘gatherings’ display the same tendencies. However, I will explore below, for the sake of simplicity, what may be considered to be their major over-lapping hallmarks. The characteristics identified are derived from precursory observation of Ikon, a Belfast-based “gathering”, largely through its web-site, some precursory discussions with its

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<sup>2</sup> The very nature of the Emergent Church, by way of its various expressions and fluidity, renders it impossible to estimate the number of adherents or even “streams” within the movement.

<sup>3</sup> There are centralising impulses in movement such as Dan Kimball’s Vintage Church in Santa Cruz, California. In the UK his counterpart is possibly Andrew Jones, known on the internet as Tall Skinny Kiwi. Jones is a world-travelling speaker, teacher, and activist for “simple” churches, house churches, and churches without worship services.

founder, and other sources. Ikon, I would conjecture, appears to be a “pure” type of Emerging church that displays most, if not all of the attributes to be found universally but not exclusively.

### **A (non) Definition of IKON: An Emerging Church Escaping Typology**

“There was once a small town filled with believers....(dis/obeying) God”  
(Ikon web-site)

Ikon was established in 2002, chiefly under the inspiration of one individual, Peter Rollins, at a time when he was studying for his doctoral thesis at Queen’s College, Belfast. However, Rollins attributes Ikon’s inception to a number of people (some of which remain prominent in Ikon’s “gatherings”) who sought to advance their overlapping interests and concerns. Indeed, many of their activities and projects, particularly of an art-based nature, were already underway. The group rapidly establish Ikon and in the words of Rollins:

[Ikon] filled the gap which I had created....my job was to create a void (a place, time) and then sit back and see it filled. The void particularly appealed to the arts community in Belfast who could use their skills (art, music etc.) which churches didn’t seem to value.<sup>4</sup>

Ikon’s “welcome” web-page emphasises a concern with the arts but ranges further in attempting to capture the spirit of its enterprise:

Inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life, we are a Belfast-based collective who offer anarchic experiments in transformance arts. Challenging the distinction between theist and atheist, faith and no faith, our main gathering employs a cocktail of live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, theatre, ritual and reflection in an attempt to open up the possibility of a theodramatic event.<sup>5</sup>

Ikon also refers to itself as a “cyndicate”.<sup>6</sup> At the centre of this “cyndicate” is a nucleus of individuals who appear to be particularly dedicated to the cause and provide expertise to help nurture an embryonic collective. They meet quarterly to plan events and discuss the ongoing development of Ikon. Beyond this core are a number of individuals who are involved with helping out, setting up and/or running various events and groups.

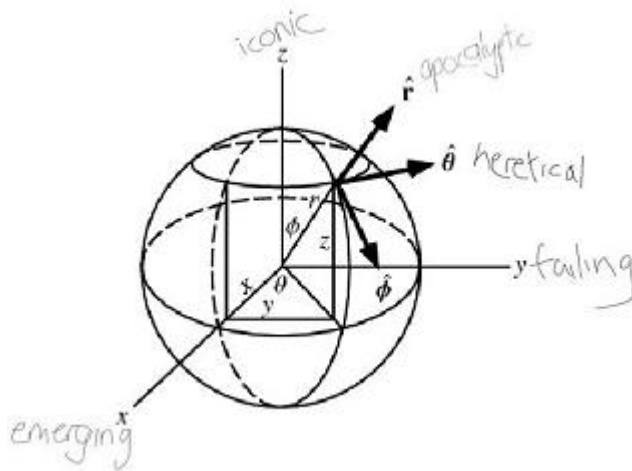
In one sense “cyndicate” refers to the word “syndicate”: an amalgamation of diverse individuals coming together for a common purpose. Thus Ikon views itself as a specific type of collective that shares a united vision while simultaneously acknowledging difference, diversity and disparate interests. Consequently, the playful use of the word “cyndicate” refers to a dissimilar group of individuals who nonetheless all display the same ethos: to “question religion precisely because we love religion so much, questioning our understanding of God only because we love God”.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Peter Rollins, April 21, 2008.

<sup>5</sup>[http://wiki.ikon.org/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://wiki.ikon.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page) (accessed January 5, 2008).

<sup>6</sup><http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Cyndicate> (accessed January 7, 2008).

<sup>7</sup><http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Cyndicate> (accessed January 7, 2008).



Ikon typifies the arduous task of identifying the characteristics of Emerging churches and establishing any form of typology. The collective's post-modern, ever-changing and near-anarchic nature renders this so. Ikon's web-site home page puts things in perspective by stating that:

The problem with attempting to describe what one is boils down to the fact that any such descriptions will inevitably fail....Ikon is still emerging....A (non) definition celebrates the existence of an impenetrable fluidity and elusiveness....we operate with a liquid system that celebrates ambiguity, openness and change.<sup>8</sup>

### **“It's Church Jim, But Not As We Know It!”**

“For months she had lived, meditating inside me, whispering that she had the final answer....” (Ikon web-site)

The embrace of non-institutional contexts of meetings and worship (where worship is present) is one of the Emerging Church's most obvious hallmarks. Traditional expressions of Christianity, from the denominational structure down to the local church congregation meeting on its own premises, are frequently regarded as outmoded, constricting for believers and non-believers alike, and judged as simply no longer viable in the post-modern context.<sup>9</sup> Thus, contemporary Christianity must be liberated from these institutionalized constraints which are inflexible, bureaucratic and give rise to routinization at the expense of creative spirituality.<sup>10</sup>

For the “emergents” one of the greatest challenges is in reaching Generation X and those in their 'teens and early twenties (Generation Y). Thus the Emerging Church seeks new strategies in establishing an appeal for the young, and attempts more than focusing on contemporary worship styles. Rather, it is deemed conducive to take into account community factors and a leadership ethos that is highly relational. To some extent, then, the “emergents” are a generation protesting against Church

<sup>8</sup> <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon:About> (accessed January 7, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> While the “emergents” might seem to be wishing to hasten the death of the denomination, some are prepared to stay within or co-operate with such structures and in doing so creating what they term a “mixed economy” in the spiritual marketplace. Establish congregations that are dedicated to the ideas and values of the movement are few and far between.

<sup>10</sup> Guest and Taylor (2006: 52) notice the parallel with the New Age movement's emphasis on “alternative spiritualities”.

governance that is characterised by a culture of authority and an older generational headship which has shaped the organizational structure of much of conventional Christianity.

The Emerging Church's unstructured ecclesiology means that the movement can communicate and interact through fluid and open networks because it is decentralized with little organizational coordination. Participants avoid assumptions about the role and nature of the Christian Church, attempting to gather together in ways specific to their local context. Hence, the preference for informal locations of meetings in order to engage with "public space". This allows the flexibility to transform, adapt and be relevant to a fast-changing post-modern culture, whereas traditional "church mode" tends to ossify and fails to adapt socio-cultural environments.

The Emerging Church seems to subscribe to the view that there exists a fair degree of "believing without belonging", or at least potential believing, and that institutional structures are a barrier to participation and evangelism. In this way "emergents" share with the "house church" movement of the 1970s a willingness to challenge traditional church structures/organizations, although many of the former also respect the different expressions of traditional Christian denominations. For their part, in recent years, many mainstream denominations have identified the need to be "fluid" in the sense that they recognize secular developments and competing obligation on people's time.

In responding to the challenges of post-modernity, the "emergents" seek to be relevant to contemporary culture via the recognition that the Christian Church invariably alters as the wider culture is transformed. To accomplish this, "emergents" seek to articulate the Christian message in such a way that it is not confined to inherited cultural expressions on the one hand, while attempting to illuminate the original sense of the gospel on the other. This endeavour involves both an appreciation of historical Christianity and the necessity for innovation in appropriating meaningful Christian practice and narrative in the post-modern setting. The Emerging churches thus make use of contemporary music and films, alongside ancient liturgical customs and eclectic expressions of spirituality, with the aim of constructing church gathering genuinely reflective of a local community's tastes through the utilization of informal settings including cafes, bars and the like.

Ikon is "fluid" in the sense that its varied and constantly changing activities take place at a number of venues. "Gatherings" or "services" have moved from one venue to another. At present they are held in the evening once a month at the "Black Box", a live music venue, in Belfast's Cathedral quarter. Such gathering are usually in the form of discussions which in the past have ranged across a number of subject areas including The God Delusion, The Second Coming, Fundamentalism, "Narrative" and "Queer". Pete Rollins puts the spirit behind Black Box events in this way:

(The Black Box) is many different things to different people and so the answer to the question as to what it is depends upon the one who asks the question. It's primary influence however is broadly Judeo-Christian, particularly in its apophatic and deconstructive expression (it's other influences are death-of-God theology and phenomenology). It is made up of liberal and conservative, theist and atheist, Christian and otherwise, although the space itself often questions such distinctions. We engage in...'transformance art'.... which seeks to evoke transformation in those present. Transformance art also evokes the notion of performance art, and indeed the various gatherings can take this form.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Pete Rollins (May 14, 2008)

Black Box events are supplemented by Minikron which initially met when no Ikon services took place. Now it constitutes smaller, more intimate “gatherings” offering “courses” as frameworks for the discussion of topics that interest the wider community. It amounts to an informal, “safe space” where there is a sharing and exploration of the themes raised in Ikon services in greater depth.

In addition, Ikon holds the Last Supper event which is staged on the first Tuesday evening of every month at the Gaslight coffee shop in a local Belfast community centre. The Last Supper amounts to a “gathering” in which twelve people meet informally over food and wine to question an invited guest about what they believe and why they believe it. The Last Supper has been described as a site “where the salon meets the sanctuary: a reverie of critical



thinking, where old orthodoxies can find themselves honoured guests at one table or unceremoniously bounced from the next”.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Virtual Communitas***

“Nice one Cazi - I don't think I would send it to my mother though” (Ikon web-site)

While they have not neglected more traditional means of discussing and disseminating their ideas, the embrace of the new technologies by the “emergents” is in line with post-modern modes of communication. Emerging Church methodology includes frequent use of multimedia channels and the Internet to facilitate global networks and to converse about such subjects as theology, philosophy, culture, politics and social issues. Emergent “blogs” are numerous and mark not only an effort to be relevant to contemporary culture. Grassroots movements, particularly of a Protestant sectarian nature, made use of media “underground” methods such as religious tracts and books - often in an atmosphere of intimidation fostered by the Christian establishment throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the light of the controversy surrounding the Emergent Church, supporters similarly use the internet anonymously to globally spread their controversial and even subversive views.

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<sup>12</sup> William Crawley, BBC Presenter, [http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Last\\_Supper](http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Last_Supper) (accessed January 10, 2008).



In the early 1990s, the World Wide Web hardly existed. Its increasing use by a variety of religious constituencies, or as a source of information about religious groups, contributed to the new phenomenon of “religion-in-cyberspace”. Through web-sites the “emergents” have developed their own “in house” jargon where terms such as “generous”, “missional”, “authentic” and “narrative” serve as marker by which they are able to speedily recognize each other through the creation of a “virtual communitas”. These are forms of new religiosity where the physical gatherings are relatively rare and where communication involves subscription to publications and specially organized events. In the case of Ikon it constitutes the “fluid” church taken to its logical conclusion.

Ikon has several opportunities for web-site postings. This includes Reflections - an initiative that involves contributions mostly written by people within the Ikon community for use during its “services”. Also included are a number of short pieces offered by “random others” - those who do not attend “gatherings”. A further initiative, by way of illustration, is Witness which “hopes to be a place where those connected to Ikon can coordinate actions and collaborate with one another in an attempt to bring positive change to society”.<sup>13</sup> Witness initially formed as a group of people loosely connected to Ikon who, during the run up to the war in Iraq, endeavoured to wrestle with the implications of the UK’s involvement.

### Theodrama

“It would be remiss of me not to offer you the solution” (Ikon web-site)

Engaging with the post-modern world through various mediums of art with a spiritual message is a further characteristic of Emerging churches. Ikon has a growing reputation through its own contribution. EIKON is Ikon’s project that includes free art exhibitions which take place at Belfast’s prominent Waterfront Hall. The enterprise is orientated to aiding local artists and includes a workshop. In addition, ART SPACE amounts to a provision on Ikon’s web-site for anyone to provide examples of their art work, generally of a religio-spiritual nature.



As part of its fluid structure Ikon provides opportunities for various artists to contribute in disparate locations in co-operative ventures to forge experiments in

<sup>13</sup> <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Witness> (accessed January 5, 2008).

transformance art that reflect the values, skills and context of a particular community. In addition, Ikon also partakes of numerous conferences and festivals where its art genres are frequently on display. For instance, almost from its inception Ikon has contributed to events at the Greenbelt annual national Christian festival where it has gained a high profile, not to mention a certain degree of notoriety. This included, in 2006, a “service” in the form of a theodrama on the theme of Fundamentalism that attracted almost 1,000 people.

Ikon also holds its own film nights. The content of features shown varies considerably. In the past this has ranged from fairly conventional evangelical films such as *A Thief in the Night* - a post-tribulation, End Times story, to *Palindromes* that follows a young girl’s experiences of living with a pro-life fundamentalist family. Also exemplifying Ikon’s concern with “debate” was the recent showing of *Inherit the Wind* that covered the notorious 1925 Tennessee “Monkey Trial” over teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution in American Schools.

### **Rejecting Meta-Narratives**

“Mocking little, dangling thread of doubt...” (Ikon web-site)

Many “emergents” see themselves as engaging *with* post-moderns. That is, they live alongside and dialogue with contemporary culture, accepting that post-modernity must be negotiated, while not denying the essential truth of the biblical message. A second category of “emergents” have opted to work *as* post-moderns. That is, they reject meta-narratives and recognize their collapse as inherited, overarching explanations of life. Moreover, an absolute “truth” cannot be known or, at least, cannot be known absolutely. It follows that they frequently express concerns regarding propositional “truth”. Typical are the writings of LeRon Shults, formerly a professor of theology at Bethel Theological Seminary, who conjectures that the truly infinite God of Christian faith is beyond all linguistic grasping, to capture God in finite human propositional structures is nothing short of linguistic idolatry.<sup>14</sup>

Ikon can be placed in the second category of “emergents” and sees itself as situated beyond two extremes.<sup>15</sup> Its web-site discusses the term “idol” (derived from the Greek root *eidos*) meaning to make manifest the very essence of that which is intended toward, revealing its inner workings. Here, idolatry can be understood as the sin of viewing something which renders God’s very essence visible to human experience. Such idolatry can be either aesthetic (like the Golden Calf related in the Old Testament story) or conceptual. In the latter form of idolatry God is made intelligible by constructing a doctrinal image which comes to be viewed as a manifestation of his essence. The opposite of this idolatry is the equally mistaken humanistic view that claims God, if God exists, is utterly unknown and thus irrelevant to human life.

For Ikon, to treat something as an “icon”, however, is acceptable in that it draws humans into a deep contemplation of that which cannot be reduced to words, images or experience. No one can look upon the unmediated presence of God and live. God’s presence must be veiled. Hence in the icon God is neither made wholly manifest nor utterly concealed but rather remains concealed in the manifestation. God thus remains utterly transcendent amidst his immanence.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Shults (2005).

<sup>15</sup> <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon>About> (accessed January 5, 2008).



### Ambivalent Theology

"D-O-C-T-R-I-N-E- is s-u-f-f-o-c-a-t-i-n-g- me..." (Ikon web-site)

The acceptance of the advent of post-modernity by the Emergent Church can also be discerned by its lack of theological coherence; a firm theological structure being largely eschewed as a superfluous mega-narrative. The "emergents" rather ambivalent theology is underpinned by the influence of post-modern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida. Translated for the Emerging Church, the theological enterprise seeks to understand scriptural reference by comprehending and describing its genesis, the process of emergence from an origin or event. The implications for the developing theology, or even its absence, has proved to be profound.

Post-modern epistemology is fundamental to the Emerging Church movement's beliefs. Thus "emergents" have endeavoured to forge a post-foundational theology which rejects certainty in favour of a disposition they describe as more conjectural in which their views are merely just several among many legitimate, non-dogmatic religious voices engaging in dialog. In this sense "emergents" maintain that it is necessary to deconstruct, reconstruct and reshape Christianity in order to engage post-Christian Western culture in a two-way "conversation", rather than proclaim a message that is alien to that culture.

Because of its rejection of meta-narratives, the "emerging" movement tends to be suspicious of systematic theology, while the diversity of theologies is viewed as divisive. God did not reveal a systematic theology but a narrative, and no language is capable of encapsulating the absolute "truth" that only He is capable of knowing. "Emergent" leader Tony Jones states "We must stop looking for some objective Truth that is available when we delve into the text of the Bible" (Jones 2004: 201). In this respect, the Emerging movement is radically reformist, even turning its epistemology against itself by suggesting that its propositions could be in error. The predominantly young participants in the movement prefer narrative presentations drawn from their own experiences and biblical storylines over propositional, scriptural exposition.<sup>16</sup>

For Ikon, religious traditions, including theological constructs, tend to be "idols" for the reasons explored above. In relation to creeds of every form, a poem<sup>17</sup> deposited on Ikon's web-site exemplifies much of its thinking and includes the lines:

Knitting our creeds tightly  
 We are deluded by our certainty  
 Our rightness of belief  
 God has become the solution, the patch  
 We distort our world  
 We efface the other  
 Demanding, Excluding, demeaning, outwitting  
 Shouting, THIS is how it is

<sup>16</sup> If anything, the post-modern turn taken by the Emerging Church dovetails with related schools of thought, perhaps most obviously that of the narrative theology movement. Narrative theology grew in popularity from the 1980s and advanced the view that the Church's use of scripture should focus on a narrative presentation of the faith, rather than on the exclusive development of a systematic theology. Also frequently referred to as "post-liberal" theology, narrative theology was inspired by a group of theologians at Yale Divinity School, many influenced theologically by such diverse sources as Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>17</sup> [http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon:Community\\_Portal](http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon:Community_Portal) (accessed January 11, 2008).

Wearing our creeds  
Wearing our beliefs  
Wearing them tightly  
'Til We are barely breathing

We got Distracted,  
And god has contracted,  
We have made flesh become word

We have reified our creeds:  
I am right  
*They* are wrong  
Our truths are binding  
and  
We will not let them go

Unravelling our creeds  
Unravelling our beliefs  
Unravelling them creatively with care and daring  
So that truth is breathing

Let our creeds come apart at the seams:  
I am right  
*Yet I* am wrong  
Our truths are transforming  
and  
We let them go....

By departing from theological frameworks Ikon acknowledges itself as a “heretical community”. Each revelation of God requires interpretation and these interpretations are inevitably limited by such obstacles as language, intelligence, cultural context, tradition and psychological makeup. In recognizing this, Ikon endeavours to hold prevailing understandings of God lightly, allowing both the Spirit and other people to challenge what members of its community believes. This self-assigned heretical stance in relation to the wider Christian community is derived from the sense Ikon has of coming from the same faith tradition but seeks to read it through divergent lenses. It follows that Ikon celebrates the multiplicity of ways in which Christianity can be understood. Ikon criticizes more established forms of the faith but, in turn, expects to be challenged. In this regard Ikon claims to be “neither a conservative or liberal community for the point is not what you believe but whether you are willing to challenge and critique it”.<sup>18</sup>

### **Ambivalence Towards tradition**

“Unwind me, dislocate me, toss me to the sky” (Ikon web-site)

There is a related concern. Whatever category under which the “emergents” can be subsumed, they are often critical of “Legalism” - a pejorative term often hitherto used by evangelical of different hues not only to describe an unhealthy fixation with law or codes of conduct or creeds, but traditional or liturgical obsession. In some respects there is an obvious antecedence to be observed here for the “emergents.” The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) has, from its inception, rejected creeds, as

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<sup>18</sup> <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon:About> (accessed January 5, 2008).

much as hierarchical structures.<sup>19</sup> The dislike of legalism has influenced the Emerging Church movement through Quaker mystics such as Richard Foster. This influence is often seen in the mystical tendencies of “emergent” worship and devotional styles, while valuing the sacred as a personal, subjective experience.

Such a posturing informs the Emergent churches’ attitude towards Christian tradition generally. Traditional denominations are often seen as an anathema, traditional forms of worship as archaic, and the architectural of “traditional mode” church buildings as superfluous. However, this attitude remains rather ambivalent; tradition has its appeal in that the ethos of the Emerging Church is experimental, eclectic and conducive to a post-modern playfulness.

Some strands of the movement embrace more conventional forms of music, while candles and incense or “smells and bells” have their attraction alongside “funky worship” with multi-dimensional sensorial techniques through the attempt to be creative and express experiential aspects of their gatherings. In its more extreme eclectic form, precedence was to be observed during the mid-1980s in the so-called Nine O’Clock Service that was a youth-oriented alternative Christian worship commencing in Sheffield (UK), at St. Thomas’ in Crookes. Starting with about 30 people the community known as the 72 group grew to nearly 300 under the tutelage of Chris Brain, a curate at the church. Flashing lights, aspects of the “rave” culture mixed with “goth rock”, Gregorian chanting and incense all constituted part of the Planetary Mass. Following through with this pick ‘n mix of genres local expressions of Emerging churches may create the context of a dark sanctuary filled with votive candles, along with fast-pumped images flashing across video screens, while, at the altar, a DJ with a computer mixes the music to set the ambiance of the meeting.

HUSH, named with a certain amount of mischievous irony, is Ikon’s electronic-based music night hosted by a local DJ, “Sofa Kid”, and takes place after the monthly Ikon “gathering”. It features a mixture of live performances from a range of invited DJs and electronic artists. The music involves an eclectic range of ambient “scapes” and “busy beats” with an emphasis on creating a “laid back”, “late night feel” that seemingly aims to attract a younger generation.<sup>20</sup>



Ikon nonetheless embraces marked contrasts. A further inspirational force for the Emerging movement is that of the Taizé Community in France which parallels the “emergent” experience in several ways, but whose novel expressions also turn up in more conventional congregations. Traditional symbols in this community such as candles and crosses have intensified importance in creating a particular ambiance and generating subjective feelings. In this spirit an Ikon “gathering” in November, 2006,

<sup>19</sup> A number of Quakers have begun to recognize the over-lap between themselves and “emergents” and subsequently have come to encourage dialogue and cross-cultural exploration in a similar manner as the Emerging Church movement. These “convergent” Quakers have focused attention on translating the Quaker tradition into a post-modern expression.

<sup>20</sup> <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Hush> (accessed January 11, 2008).

at a tiny ancient Chapel above St. George's Church of Ireland main chamber, centred on a tray of candles shimmering their light around the room. In the words of one participant: "Sitting on the floor, we were led on a journey of thoughts centering on our inevitable failure to see the Divine in others, and latterly, the impossibility of being Christ in others".<sup>21</sup>

Taizé also places emphasis on meditation and the experiences derived from the monastic life than upon scripture. Within the wider Emerging Church there is a growing exploration of a similar kind of monasticism, known as new-monasticism and typified by Moot in the UK<sup>22</sup>. While Ikon does not embrace the whole monastic "package", it has periodically "bought" into aspects of it. In 2007-08 Ikon, through their friend "Padraig", led four silent retreats over the based on "A Retreat of Anticipation for Advent and the Three Marys"; Mary, Sister of Martha, Mary, the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Peter Rollins, Ikon's founder, puts such ventures in this way: "Silent retreats etc. fit very well with what Ikon is about....many in Ikon participate (yet it is not officially Ikon)".<sup>23</sup>

### Post-Evangelical

"The task is ended - go in pieces" (Ikon web-site)

A particular "stream" flowing into the Emerging Church is that characterized by the term post-evangelical. The emerging movement is a protest against much of evangelicalism as conventionally practiced. The Emerging Church is post-evangelical in several ways. Firstly, the movement becomes missional by participating the redemptive work of God in this world by engaging with the wider community typified by the holistic of the ministry of Jesus who befriended prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners.



Guantanamo Jesus

Post-evangelical orientations also result from disenchantment with the disposition of conventional Evangelical churches. Much is exemplified by the well-read book by David Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*. Tomlinson, once a principal leader of the British Restorationist movement of the 1970s, claims that post-evangelicals are not impressed by the "personality jostling, political manoeuvrings, and empire building" of 'bigger', 'better' and more 'powerful' churches (Tomlinson 1995: 144-45). Rather, post-evangelical Christians long for fresh expressions of spirituality and an "alternative" church which, in Tomlinson's case, constitutes Holy Joe's which meets in a London bar where there are no sermons or hymns and where the assembled gathering decides what is going to be discussed.

An acknowledged controversial element of post-evangelicalism is that many in the "emerging" movement are sceptical about the "in versus out" mentality of much of

<sup>21</sup> [http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Things\\_that\\_happened\\_in\\_2006](http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Things_that_happened_in_2006) (accessed January 7, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Based in Westminster, central London, Moot seeks modes of communal living in the urban context and recognizes the heritage left by saints, philosophers and mystics. See <http://www.moot.uk.net/>.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Peter Rollins, April 21, 2008.

conventional evangelicalism. In short, to separate the “saved” from the “unsaved” in a detrimental manner is counter-productive to the cause of evangelism. Some “emergents” take this further in suggesting that it does not matter whether one belongs to another faith tradition.

The mainstay of Ikon’s proselytisation is stated to be “street evangelism.” This includes the novelty of inviting others to evangelise those who are evangelising. This is deemed to be part of a learning process that is then integrated into Ikon’s “services” that entail hearing from other faiths which in the past have included speakers from the Zen Buddhist, Baha’i and Hare Krishna communities.

The thinking behind Ikon’s Evangelism Project is to “listen and learn”. This emphasis is derived from the conviction that evangelizing the stranger leads to a tendency to bring conversion in the same cultural image: replacing one cultural and religious image by another, creating a binary of “consumption” and “exclusion”.<sup>24</sup> Evangelism consequently means learning from the beliefs and practices of those being evangelized. This philosophy is not one by which all beliefs and practices are all deemed equal. Nor is it “fundamentalist” in claiming an absolute “truth”. Those evangelizing cannot “give God”, only create a space in which God can “give”. “Street evangelism”, then according to Peter Rollings, “is about being evangelized - so the [Evangelism Project] street stuff is about being evangelized”.<sup>25</sup>

The “emergents” go further in their critique of conventional evangelism. They attempt a pluralistic dialog with the surrounding culture and to break down barriers between believers and non-believers, both being free to express “uncertainty” as well as certainty regarding the faith. Indeed, “uncertainty” is regarded as a healthy idiom. In this respect, the advocates of the Emergent Church seemingly transcend the more dogmatic thinking of the popular Alpha courses that have run for a decade in one in four churches in the UK and which now has a global outreach. Alpha, a ten week structured programme centring on the basics of the faith, has attempted to create an informal setting with the aim of winning converts and bringing them *into* the local church.

IKON, runs Omega courses which are an apparent counterpoint to Alpha. The courses are six weeks long and are designed to invite participants to move beyond their current understanding of Christianity through a lively yet serious interrogation, rather than exploration of faith. Anticipating the courses’ controversial nature, prospecting guests are advised to “strongly consider whether it is right for them because it may turn out not to be what they expect or desire”.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Ecumenical**

“God spoke to me, repeating four simple words, 'I do not exist'” (Ikon web-site)

The “emergents” publicly advocate ecumenism though they admit to being intolerant of theological conservatives who view the authority of scripture as having absolute authority for doctrine and practice. “Emergents” espouse an open, flexible, and subjective view of doctrine in which they embrace a continued re-examination of theology which causes them to see faith as a journey rather than a destination. This is a natural consequence of their rejection of unqualified certainty in faith. The

<sup>24</sup> <http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Ikon:About#Heretical> (accessed May10, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Peter Rollings, April 25, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> [http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/The\\_Omega\\_Course](http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/The_Omega_Course) (accessed May 7, 2008).

movement's participants thus claim they are creating a safe environment for those with opinions ordinarily rejected within historic orthodoxy.

Ecumenism, of course, is not new. Yet the “emergents” seem to be taking ecumenism almost to its further conclusion through an “open” theology and “conversation”. This openness leads many of them to extend an invitation to people of all religions and none to dialog. The Last Supper, Ikon’s, monthly gathering, as part of its mission states the aim “to foster the understanding of different worldviews....we endeavour to refrain from any form of aggression”.<sup>27</sup> Previous guests have included Tony Jones (Emergent Village), Prof. Tony Campolo (sociologist and one time pastoral advisor to President Clinton), Bishop Pat Buckley (rouge Catholic Priest and gay activist), Christopher McKnight (atheistic philosopher), members of the Belfast Anarcho-Syndicist Association and representatives of the Muslim community.

### Apocalyptic

“...God is the wound, the hole in the weave...” (Ikon Web-site)

A notable emphasis of the Emerging Church is on correct living or “orthopraxy”. The contention is that how a person lives is more important than what he or she believes. Experience does not prove that those who *believe* the right things *live* the right way. Every judgment scene in the Bible is portrayed as a judgment based on works, rather than a theological examination. “Emergents” favour the sharing of experiences and interactions such as testimonies, prayer, group recitation, sharing meals and other communal practices which they believe are personal and sincere over propositional, evangelistic preaching and exegetical bible teaching, since these involve claims of clear knowledge regarding absolute truth. Orthopraxy is “apocalyptic” in the sense that it is the “living out” of the Kingdom to come.

Ikon puts a measurable emphasis on “apocalyptic” in various senses. “Apocalyptic” refers to the incoming of a singular, unrepeatabe event that is absolutely inconceivable, an event that could not have been predicted in advance of its coming and which defies all expectations. Ikon seeks to reclaim and celebrate the apocalyptic nature of God, rediscovering the one who continually escapes all attempts at domestication through theology, images and experience. By recognizing that religious traditions and beliefs are icons rather than idols it follows that these traditions must embrace the pseudo-concept of God as one who cannot be contained in any concept. There is a traditional tendency to reduce God to an object like other objects, one which can be grasped by human faculties.

There is a further sense in which Ikon is “apocalyptic”. Another of the “streams” flowing into the Emergent Church is prophetic vision. The movement is consciously and deliberately provocative. It is this prophetic aspect which shapes the Emerging Church’s attitude towards politics and political activism. This does not necessarily mean the endorsement of abortion or gay sexuality, but the Emergent Church tends to be leftward leaning in opposition to right-wing conservative politics. This concern manifests itself in a variety of ways depending on the local community and in ways that defy the labels of “conservative” and “liberal”. This emphasis on justice is expressed in such practical expressions as feeding the poor, visiting the sick and prisoners, stopping human trafficking and working for environmental causes.

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<sup>27</sup> [http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Last\\_Supper](http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Last_Supper) (accessed May 10, 2008).



Are You Coming?

It is this prophetic stance which exemplifies the thinking of many “cohorts” of the Emerging Church and is not without its millenarian overtones. “Emergents” express concern for what they consider to be the practical manifestation of God’s kingdom on earth, by which they mean social justice, a fresh renditioning of the social gospel. Thus Ikon embraces many charitable causes with fundraising events that usually take the form of expressive art productions. One such endeavour is in support of the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre through the VaginArt exhibition from a wide range of professional and amateur artists displaying a selection of vagina themed pieces made available for purchase by private sale and auction.

#### **Summary: God In The Hands of Angry Sinners**

“Tell yourself, or one other person, about a time you have unravelled” (Ikon web-site)

For some time Christian churches had been painfully aware of the chronic decline in congregational attendance throughout Europe, to the point that a number of traditional denominations are faced with the wholesale closure of churches, as well as the threatened collapse of their denominational structures. Church attendance has held firmer in the USA. Nonetheless, on both sides of the Atlantic, the younger generations of Generation X and Generation Y began to turn away from the conventional churches at an alarming rate. The Emerging churches would appear to offer an alternative even beyond Europe and the USA. Quite what they are, as the above account more than suggests, is difficult to quantify.

The term “Emerging Church” is increasingly employed to describe an ill-defined, fragmented, although often well-equipped religious movement. Yet it is currently little more than a fragile and diverse “conversation” being held by individuals over the Internet and at various “gatherings”. The elusive and tentative nature of this “conversation” initially makes it difficult to describe what, if anything unites the movement in terms of its characteristic, thus rendering a typology virtually an impossible task. Ikon, as explored above, nonetheless displays many of the major over-lapping hallmarks and is discernibly as “pure” a type of Emerging church that is likely to be found anywhere.

It remains clear that Ikon, like many Emerging churches, has not descended completely unannounced. There have been discernible innovations within the wider Christian community that have also led to the advent of the Emerging Church: increasing ecumenism, fresh modes of evangelism, communication and organization, alongside divergent theologies, the “fluid church”, and the felt need to be relevant to contemporary culture. The various “cohorts” that form the Emerging Church movement thus appear to be calibrating pre-existing trends in numerous conventional

churches while cranking certain developments up a gear. Yet the Emerging Church remains a fragmented movement on a pilgrimage uncertain of its destination. To be sure, for many “emergents,” it is not the end point that is the priority; it is the journey through post-modernity itself that matters.

A photograph of a white card with the handwritten text "Ikon is failing" in black ink. The handwriting is casual and slightly slanted.

Ikon sees itself as constituted by pilgrims and sojourners endeavouring to constantly meditate upon the direction of the movement and be open to the divine call that draws down paths not yet traversed. Ikon acknowledges that it is on a continuing journey that is bound to encounter failure:

Ikon does not view itself as having reached some final destination/destiny but rather as being on a journey toward that which forever transcends us. As a result of this we understand ourselves in a continual state of kinetic movement and fluidity. As such we would prefer to call ourselves a community becoming Christian rather than a community of Christians, for if a Christian is someone who selflessly follows Christ and radiates divine love in a broken world then we are profoundly aware that there is much of our being that lies in darkness, still needing to be evangelised. The term “emerging” should not then be thought of as a provisional one that will someday be replaced with the word “emerged”, for we embrace the idea that re-reading, critiquing, constructing and deconstructing are all processes which remain vital for our spiritual development.<sup>28</sup>

Given the characteristics of the Emerging Church briefly discussed above, and identified in many of Ikon’s statements and activities, the Emerging Church must be viewed as radically different and “new” even if discernible trends within the earlier churches, ministries and movements may have anticipated it. Clearly, it marks a departure from conventional forms of Christianity, particularly in its more evangelical forms. For this reason it has been met with vociferous opposition.<sup>29</sup>

Cecil Andrews, a fundamentalist and founder of Take Heed Ministries in Belfast, headed an attack on Ikon on his web-site criticizing Ikon’s blog entitled “God in the hands of angry sinners”. Andrews was sufficiently charitable to “...pray that God will be pleased to graciously enlighten many ‘emergents’ with His saving truth so that they will in consequence ‘emerge’ from Satan’s grip and Kingdom into the ‘faith community’ of those redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ”. Andrews was invited to attend an evening of Ikon’s Last Supper to dialogue, and he duly attended.

I asked Peter Rollins, founder of Ikon, how he reacted to the kinds of criticisms that Ikon attracted from traditional evangelicals and fundamentalists. He retorted, “I tend only to respond to critique which I feel is genuinely trying to engage with the ideas rather than simply condemning them”. I also quizzed him about the “Fundamentalism theodrama” at the Greenbelt Christian festival where Ikon reports

<sup>28</sup> [http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Image:Ikon\\_Full.jpg](http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Image:Ikon_Full.jpg) (accessed May 12, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> There are plenty of critics and debates can be quite heated. Perhaps the movement’s most outspoken opponents is D. A. Carson (2005). Other unfavourable works include Lednickey (2002) and Smith (2005).



on its web-site that the event was bombarded by fundamentalist protesters decrying Ikon.<sup>30</sup> Rollins replied:

In terms of the protest - we put that on!!! It was Ikon people doing it as part of the gathering. It was about fundamentalism so what better thing to do than have some protests and protest against ourselves!

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Peter Rollins, April 23, 2008