
Defining Transformative Churches

In early 2003, just when the so-called emerging church was growing in publishing popularity, I burned out with church. Not burned out with ministry in particular, but with the politics and dysfunctions that I had experienced while working in churches. I was not alone. Indeed, such burnout in others helped spark the initial turn toward emerging church models and helped these models attract so much attention. What was curious about my situation is that, just as the emerging church was gaining in attention, I burned out in particular with the emerging church.¹

I had become involved in new approaches to church in 1991, during my last year in high school. I began to attend what was then the most dynamic church in the area: NewSong, founded by Dieter Zander.² It grew out of a college-aged Bible study, beginning in an apartment and then moving to a succession of theaters and gyms as

1. For works expressing this new popularity see, for example, Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) and Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

it grew in numbers. The mission was to reach out to “Generation X,” which was seen as a generation alienated from church in general and standard models of Christianity in particular.³ It was, in some ways, the epitome of the church growth models initiated by Willow Creek, updated for a new generation, seeking to reach out to the unchurched through a shared language and a Sunday service that had appealing elements.

Indeed, the music on Sunday mornings was quite engaging, and the preaching was superb. There was more than this, however. It was not a professional-led community. It was an involved community where college-aged young people were both the target audience and made up the bulk of the voluntary leadership. The people were empowered to engage in ministry as small group leaders, in service to the broader community, and in other ways. I became part of real community of friends, seeking depth together and with God, seeking to reflect this in our whole lives. Other friends became part of two separate church plants, both in nearby cities, where the goals of these new church communities were taking on even more elements of what would later be characterized as the emerging church.⁴

While in seminary, I moved from being a voluntary participant to becoming an intern at NewSong, working with other leaders in small group communities and in developing expressions of participatory worship.⁵ This later led to leading a young adult community where

2. See Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 323–38.

3. See Dieter Zander, “The Gospel for Generation X,” *Christianitytoday.com*, April 1, 1995, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/global/printer.html?/e/1995/spring/5l2036.html> for an article by Zander on this topic written a few years after I started attending his church. Cf. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

4. See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 28–30 for a description of one of the church plants initiated by friends at NewSong Church.

5. For example, see Patrick Oden, “Art and the Contemporary Church,” <http://www.dualravens.com/fullerlife/artandthecontemporarychurch.htm>.

the teaching style took on the kind of shared conversation that has later become popular in emerging church circles.⁶ All of these experiences were indeed initially very motivating and invigorating, both for my creative interest in ministry and my growth in community with God and with others. Yet the frustrations abounded as well. There were issues in both my own experiences and in the experiences of those I knew who were involved in these protoexpressions of emerging church models.

When Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*, and then Dan Kimball's book *Emerging Churches*, popularized for a new audience that which I had been involved with for a number of years, I reacted not with excitement about the new possibilities but with curious ambivalence.⁷ These models and insights were not all they claimed to be. They offered a fresh expression but could not seem to sustain themselves without running into their own particular problems, as well as the problems that plague churches in general. With such texts pointing toward a new wave of church renewal, a renewal that I had engaged in and found wanting, I became disillusioned with both the emerging church movement and with church ministry in general. Where was I to turn? The prophet Jeremiah seemed to have words for me: "Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."⁸

I left NewSong, and left ministry in general, moving to the mountains for an extended time, where I read Scripture anew, the early church fathers, as well as monastic writings such as the four volume *Philokalia* and John Cassian.⁹ After a while, I began turning

6. See Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, *Free for All: Rediscovering the Bible in Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

7. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

8. Jeremiah 6:16. All Scripture quotations will be from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

to more contemporary theologians whom I discovered while in seminary. I dove into Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* and other writers, not for philosophical information but because their studies of God were devotional for my soul. I was seeking depth and breadth in my parched faith. Fuller Seminary offered a class on Moltmann, which I audited, and with this course as a guide, I read all of his major works—having only read a couple texts prior to this. Early on in such reading, I was struck by a very curious insight. What Moltmann was discussing in his systematic theology was very similar to the kinds of discussions I had heard in emerging church circles. Moltmann was certainly more robust, yet the discussion was oriented in the same basic direction. With this realization, Moltmann revived my interest in the emerging church conversation, a conversation he had never heard about, yet he seemed to be sharing many similar themes and priorities.¹⁰ How so? The answer to that question is the basis of this study.

Purpose and Thesis

The purpose of this present work is to develop in writing that which more instinctively occurred to me while reading—namely, that there

9. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, 4 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1979–95); John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist, 1997).

10. As far as I know, I was the first to bring the emerging church to his attention when I wrote an introductory study relating Moltmann and the emerging church in 2007, which I mailed to him. He responded, welcoming the study and noting he had not heard of this movement. I subsequently sent him a copy of *Emerging Churches* by Gibbs and Bolger. In 2009, he participated in an emerging church conference in the Chicago area hosted by Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt. It should be noted that while Moltmann had not heard about the more recent expression of the emerging church, he had been involved with forms of Christian community that presaged the emerging church movement, most notably the Open Door community in Atlanta, Georgia. See Peter R. Gathje, *Sharing the Bread of Life: Hospitality and Resistance at the Open Door Community* (Atlanta: Open Door Community, 2006) and Eduard N. Loring, *The Cry of the Poor: Cracking White Male Supremacy—An Incendiary and Militant Proposal* (Atlanta: Open Door Community, 2010).

is a vital connection between the practices of these new model churches and the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. Over the last few years, this connection has become even clearer. Indeed, even as Moltmann revived my interest in emerging church possibilities, the emerging church itself has continued to develop, honing and expanding the discussion, bringing together other similar ecclesial streams into a more cohesive expression—one to which I will, for the sake of simplicity, apply the term *transformative churches*. What does it mean to be a transformative church? Two elements orient my overall purpose. A church is transformative when it engages in the development of people to better reflect the life of Christ in their lives, and when this transformation then extends itself beyond the boundaries of a church community, as such people live their lives in new ways wherever they are.

It is this, then, that forms the basis of my thesis throughout the present work: we become in the church who we are to be in the world. This understanding of a transformative mission of the kingdom is, I assert, at the heart of both Moltmann's theological project and the ecclesiological project of transformative churches.

There are two possible approaches to participatory and communal transformation, each of which we can find in both church history and contemporary theology. One is the sectarian approach, in which the religious community develops a distinct boundary between itself and the surrounding world, ideologically and often geographically. This religious community is able to develop within itself the transformative ideals that can be, then, a model *to* those outside of its boundaries. They do not necessarily exclude others, but may seek to include, indeed invite, them to participate. This then requires their full transition from one mode of being in the world and inclusion into the boundaried community. The second approach is an embedded system. Here, the religious community provides an

orientation that is to be lived within the broader community. The church its own separated reality but a participant in the mission of God, which is open to all, and intended to be a transformative reality for all contexts.

Both Moltmann and the transformative churches express the second, embedded, model of church community. Indeed, Moltmann is especially wary about any division whatsoever between the church and the world. He argues that the world is in the church and good things are found in the world.¹¹ Yet, in general, there are still two contradictory forms of identity expressed in the world: that of God and that of not-God. This means that the church has a formative function even in the nonsectarian approach, which becomes about orienting people how to live in the world rather than how to live separated from the world. We become in the church who we are to be in the world.

This is a nondivisive distinction, utilizing the terms *church* and *world* not as separated, or inherently antagonistic, “cities,” but as differentiated levels of community. The church cannot be opposed to the world any more than a school of fish can be opposed to water; it is the milieu in which it expresses its reality. The church, however, is a necessary distinction as an identity-establishing system within the world that contrasts with other identity-establishing systems.¹²

11. Jürgen Moltmann, interview by author, Tübingen, Germany, May 17, 2011. In May 2011, I traveled to Tübingen to consult with Moltmann about this present project. Over the course of three days we had three sessions of conversations. I was able to discuss my burgeoning proposal and ask related questions, all which he graciously answered. At the beginning of the first conversation I asked permission to record the sessions, which Moltmann graciously allowed. I have since posted these discussions on my website: <http://www.dualravens.com/phd/moltmann.htm>. This present reference is at twenty-five minutes into the first session.
12. I continue to utilize the term *church* rather than other proposed alternatives so as to emphasize this community as consistent with the historic expression of Christian community and to affirm its identity as particularly formed with Christ. Other alternatives, such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Beloved Community*, may be more appropriate and less weighed down with historic and philosophical baggage; however, they also loses *church*’s reference to the particular developments of the last two thousand years and its inherent communion with both early

Such alternative identity-establishing systems create meaning and offer alternative forms of identity that are likewise both communal and participatory.¹³ We can characterize these other systems by such terms as *world* or *flesh* in Scripture. However, these are used more as reductionist labels expressing the gathered multiplicity of alternatives to God's Kingdom rather than inherently opposed to the more precisely defined *flesh* and *world*, *both of which God made*. God's reality is the defining reality and God's reality gives meaning to the form of community, and the expression of identity, within the church. We should not take the world more seriously than the God who seeks to redeem it. We should not see the world as an inherently unclean setting. When Jesus encountered the lepers, they were made clean. He transformed the setting. The church, as the body of Christ, is not an object that can be gazed upon as the model for the world; it is a collection of participants in whom the Spirit of God is forming the expression of the fullness of Christ, as individuals with each other, in this present reality we call the world.

This means, I assert, that the church is not the subject of God's work, nor is it the object that gives formative meaning and contrast. The church exists as the church of Christ only inasmuch as the participants are being formed into the likeness of Christ, expressing this likeness in a multiplicity of ways in diverse settings. This expression is not simply about being a model for how to live, nor is it merely a particular set of ethics or moral expressions that contrast with deficient models. As a participant with Christ, in the Spirit, a person who is being formed into the likeness of Christ becomes a domain of resonance of Christ, resonating the reality of Christ in distinct practices but also in participatory presence.¹⁴ Thus, a person

expressions of Christian community and other models of such community in the present, such as the Catholic or Orthodox churches.

13. Inasmuch as being human itself is inherently both communal and participatory.

who gathers with others likewise oriented reverberates the resonance of Christ in a community. This community can exist on many scales, from the local to the regional to the global to the cosmic. The self-similarity with Christ expands into a self-similar fractal across larger scales, beginning in Christ, and then in the one formed into a model of Christ, then into the body of Christ that is the church, then into the world, ultimately drawing all of creation into a new communion with God.¹⁵

This transformative integration is how Moltmann seems to understand the role of the church and this understanding is a significant part of his overall theology. Moltmann's interest in ecclesial renewal is itself longstanding, reflected in his earliest writings and deriving from both his studies and his own work as a parish minister in Germany. This means that it is not, after all, surprising that Moltmann's theology would have much to contribute to transformative churches, as we find his own proposals for such communities in almost all of his texts—from his concluding chapter in *Theology of Hope* to his most recent *Ethics of Hope*. Indeed, such theological contribution is already imbued within transformative

14. See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 311–15. Here, the contributions of Luhmann may be helpful, with Luhmann's suggestions of autopoietic systems providing a potential model for how a system can be embedded and multiply within a broader setting, thus lending itself to a fractal model of transformative church development that retains its identity in Christ as it is expanded across multiple scales. Welker himself was part of a Luhmann discussion group in Tübingen that sought to assess Luhmann's religious insights. See esp. Michael Welker, *Theologie Und Funktionale Systemtheorie—Luhmanns Religionssoziologie in Theologischer Diskussion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, trans. Peter Gilgen (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013); Niklas Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion*, ed. André Kieserling (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013).
15. On the possibility of self-similarity across scales being applied to human reality, see John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 5. Gaddis applies this to historiography, although it seems equally appropriate to apply it to theological studies as well. See Patrick Oden, "Spirits in History," in *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World: Loosing the Spirits*, ed. Kirsteen Kim, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), forthcoming.

church insights, with his writings influencing key early leaders, such as Tony Jones, in both subtle and in more explicit ways. With Moltmann's insights shaping my reading, I began seeing the missional and emerging conversations not as postmodern attempts at ecclesial readjustments but as substantive theological contributions in their own right, pointing through practices toward a holistic expression of God's work in the world and humanity's participation with this work.

By putting together the practical expressions of transformative churches and the systematic insights of Jürgen Moltmann, it is my goal to begin to construct a more adequate transformative ecclesiology.¹⁶ More than this, however, I also seek to imbue the transformative church conversations with theological intent, seeing their practices as being much more than church growth techniques, or attributes of a narrowly defined practical theology. By bringing these writers and thinkers into conversation with Moltmann, my goal is to substantiate their practices as being themselves topics of theology. Just as hope became a topic in theology, I assert so also should other practices of the church, because they are first expressions by God to the world. All theology, in such an approach, is practical. We are to be hospitable, for instance, because God is hospitable. We are to welcome strangers, for instance, because God is the welcoming God. Our practices illuminate our expressed theology, incarnating continually Christ's identity into this world.

"To live is Christ," Paul wrote to the Philippians. While this statement may take on various elements of meaning, I argue that this is not merely an ethical exhortation or a religious orientation. This is an ontological transformation in those who are participants in Christ

16. For a brief discussion of this goal in a more general sense, see Michael Welker, "Christian Theology: What Direction at the End of the Second Millennium," in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

through the Spirit with the Father. We do not lose our identity, we gain it. In becoming transformed into the likeness of Christ we become most fully who we truly are, our identity enlivened inasmuch as it is rooted in the source of all identity, that of God.¹⁷ The process of this ontological transformation is the process of salvation and sanctification. The mode of this transformation is participatory and communal, initiated by God, oriented by God, inviting us toward responsibility in responding to this transformation.¹⁸

It is participatory in that we are not passively formed but formed through our contextual practices, practices that shape our response to this world, to God, to ourselves in ways that either lead us toward fulfillment in God or dissolution away from God. This is not a salvation by works. Grace continually sustains and orients us, a free space within which we can find real freedom of being. It is communal in that our participation is never isolated but always involves other people, and it is only in the context of other people that we learn what it means to be free as a person in the fullness of God's identity.

This transformative work then take shape along the lines of the Philippians 2 hymn (Phil. 2:6-11), involving both a *kenosis* and a *perichoresis*, a letting go and a drawing together, a breathing out and a breathing in. In our experiences, this transformative work of God is liberation, initially and continually. We are liberated from alternative forms of identity and liberated into the identity of Christ. What we are liberated from can take on different expressions depending on our contexts. It is this reality that forms a secondary thesis, one that relates more specifically to transformative churches as they tend to exist in the industrialized West. The transformative churches are

17. Cf. Jon Huckins, *Thin Places* (Kansas City: The House Studio, 2012), 94.

18. For responsibility as a theological category, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles West, and Douglas Stott, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 220-45.

expressing a liberation theology, one that emphasizes the liberation of the oppressor. As such, these churches are a particular expression of a broader conversation, sharing a similar emphasis on the need to be liberated from deficient systems of identity formation, which are different in each context.

What we are liberated into remains constant. The liberation of humanity in Christ leads to the same place together with Christ. Thus, we should talk about coordinating ecclesiologies of liberation that arise from distinct contexts. This concern is at the heart of Moltmann's ecclesial interests and, indeed, part of his own personal and theological journey, leading him to be a helpful guide in understanding the present thesis. Becoming in the church who we are to be in the world assumes the answers to two distinct questions, each of which, I believe, is best answered by one of the present conversation partners. The two questions are, "Who are we to be?" and "How are we to become?" Moltmann, with his systematic theology interest, answers the former most fully, and the latter secondarily. The transformative churches, in contrast, answer the latter more fully and the former secondarily. By putting these two interlocutors together, we can arrive at a more holistic discussion of this proposal.

Transformative Church Theology

The previous section described my thesis and related assertions. It is the task of this present work to substantiate these claims as well as develop them as themes with particular meaning and expression. Before I begin this task more fully, first it is important to describe what I mean by transformative churches, describing this movement in terms of its literature as it has developed in four streams.

Overview

Transformative church theology is written primarily by pastors both for other pastors and for those within the broader emerging and traditional church communities. The emphasis is primarily on practices, and so much of the nascent theology is indirect or found in imprecise statements and approaches.¹⁹ In their seminal book *Emerging Churches*, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger specify nine practices that emerging churches share and that, as a framework, can help define this movement.²⁰ Rather than relying on their own preferences and assumptions, Gibbs and Bolger surveyed leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom to determine the common expressions found across the range of these “emerging” Christian communities.²¹ They define emerging churches as “communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.”²² This practice begins with three primary emphases, which then lead into the next six.

They write,

Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (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, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.²³

19. Not unlike Pentecostalism, which has now had about a century to reflect on its practices and now produces quite sophisticated contributions to academic theology. However, one distinction is that transformative church thinkers and writers are explicit about their own academic sources, relying on work by theologians and missiologists to provide academic foundations for practical development. See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 49.

20. See also Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000) for an excellent study of the church context leading into emerging church development and significant insight into the theological and pastoral developments that emerging churches exemplify.

21. See the preface and appendixes of Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, for more detailed description of their research methodology and sources.

22. *Ibid.*, 44.

This has served as the most common framework for understanding transformative church emphases and practice. It also serves as the source of fruitful study for continued theological reflection on relevant topics.²⁴ However, they may not be as effective for understanding the underlying theological emphases of transformative church thought. To add to these nine characteristics, I turn to another framework developed by Ryan Bolger in which he discusses the emerging church as reflecting a series of “movements of the reign of God.”²⁵

The first movement is “a communal movement.” Bolger writes, “The main task of kingdomlike churches is to equip those within the community to serve under the reign of God. To embody this kingdom, community formation must be central and involves a practical training in the gospel: how to serve, how to forgive, how to love, and how to open up your home.”²⁶ The next movement Bolger notes is a “movement of reconciliation” in which “the church must involve all peoples who submit to God’s rule, creating a new kind of people. They are to model a different way of human interaction between unlike parties.”²⁷ Third is “the movement of hospitality.” The context of the Western church is one of consumerism, in which money and goods are expressions of personal value and success. Instead of expressing the concept that “greed is good” reflected in much of the culture, and far too often in much of the church, those

23. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

24. For instance, see Patrick Oden, “An Emerging Pneumatology: Emerging Church and Jürgen Moltmann in Conversation,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18, no. 2 (2009): 263–84, where I argue these are elements of a more holistic pneumatology, similar to that proposed in the various writings of Jürgen Moltmann.

25. Ryan Bolger, “Following Jesus into Culture: Emerging Church as Social Movement,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 134.

26. *Ibid.*, 135.

27. *Ibid.*, 135–36. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 131.

who seek to illustrate the kingdom of God will live in a way that models “the gift rather than the exchange.”²⁸

The fourth movement of kingdomlike churches is “a movement of freedom” in which those who participate in the church are allowed to have equal space. This is not anarchy, where there is no leadership. Rather, those who lead do so apart from the imposition of power, recognizing the contributions each person brings.²⁹ Instead of a hierarchy, leaders in this movement help to create and maintain contexts where others find freedom to be who they are called to be in the context of a whole community.

Finally, there is the movement of spirituality. “Kingdomlike churches,” Bolger writes, “pray together, confess their sins to one another, watch over each other, and encourage one another. At times they suffer together—sometimes as a result of one another.”³⁰ This movement explores the depth of relationship with God and with each other in ways that bring spiritual maturity and increase love toward one another and toward God. These five movements are at the core of both worship and theology for transformative churches and serve not only as a description of what transformative churches value but also as a helpful standard when corrections and adjustments are necessary either for practice or for theology. Each of these aspects is rich in theological discovery and leads to continual reflection and reexamination in light of new questions and new experiences.

Even a cursory knowledge of church history makes clear that the transformative churches are not entirely new or original in most of their methods or their emphases. The historical uniqueness of this movement is in the forms of communication that burst onto the scene

28. Bolger, “Following Jesus into Culture,” 137–38.

29. Kester Brewin writes that the “route to change must not be through the exercise of power but through an exercise in empowerment.” Kester Brewin, *Signs of Emergence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 34.

30. Bolger, “Following Jesus into Culture,” 138.

in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The rise of the Internet, and with it e-mail, blogs, chat rooms, websites, social media, and other forms of information sharing allowed the dispersed transformative churches to discover they were not alone in either their ecclesial discontent or their creative explorations. At the same time, there develops channels of sharing that provide unprecedented interaction and encouragement across geographical distance.

Because one key role of a hierarchy is the sharing, or control, of information, the ability to find even more efficient methods of communication allows for a transformation of interaction, enabling otherwise isolated groups to find solidarity and communion while at the same time entirely bypassing any centralized authority. Unlike the situation with the base communities, this also means there is no controlling authority that can effectively interfere in the development or continuation of these small communities. Occasional, dynamic expressions have arisen throughout history, but these have tended to be eradicated or controlled by a hierarchy. Such expressions can now develop and continue without the need for any outside sanction.

In each of the approaches listed above, and the many others to be found in print or online, it becomes quite clear that the authors are not seeking to provide an official statement of doctrine or a definitive model, but rather are trying to describe what is happening in small communities around the world. The general themes point to resisting any central object that would give definition to these communities, or to the people involved with them. These themes emphasize the ideal of relationship. With the person of Christ providing a primary focus for the diverse and unified subjects, the individuals gather as a community in pursuit of a transformative reality with each other, for the church and for the world.

Over the last few years, however, many have dismissed the transformative church expressions as an unreliable movement that

could not sustain the weight of its own perceived importance. Declared dead and even buried, it may seem curious to focus on it in a new study.³¹ Yet there are still pockets of the movement existing in most, if not all, major cities and in many smaller towns.³² Expressions continue to take shape in a variety of contexts, both as an independent movement and as an intrachurch reform movement. There is, I can say confidently, still a movement out there, which is pushing and leading churches toward distinctive expressions of ecclesiality that differ from the standard approaches from the past. Conversations still happen and meetings still take place, now without the often-diffusing elements that come with being the trendy movement of the moment.

It is also the case that since *Emerging Churches* was published, the already loosely cohesive emerging church has seemingly separated into disparate parts. There are a number of attempts to categorize these differing emphases and priorities, all of which have weaknesses and are susceptible to becoming quickly outdated. With this in mind, I will propose my own general typology, not claiming this as in any way official, but, rather, more as a convenient way to categorize the streams of literature that I am uniting under my broad term *transformative churches*. This typology does not emphasize nuanced approaches to topics, instead focusing on distinct influences found in each category and the different ways particular communities came

31. See for example Url Scaramanga, "R.I.P. Emerging Church: An Overused and Corrupted Term Now Sleeps with the Fishes," *Out of Ur*, entry posted September 19, 2008, http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip_emerging_ch.html.

32. This may be even more true in contexts other than North America. In Britain, for instance, the Fresh Expressions movement is entering into a season of popularity and even predominance as a model for new churches. Because of their distinct context, and my lack of experience in that context, my focus will be on the experiences primarily in the United States and Canada. However, there is tremendous overlap in the priorities and methods, which allows for a shared discussion. If the churches in Britain are, in fact, more advanced in their acceptance of these new model churches, it is likely due to the fact they are also more advanced in experiencing the decline of the institutional church.

into being. There are four such formative streams: *Emerging*, *Missional*, *Fresh Expression*, and *Neo-Monastic*. All of these are represented in the early Gibbs and Bolger book. Because of the great amount of writing on the emerging church, and its various expressions, found in print and online, in what follows I will briefly describe each of these four streams and provide a representative example that can serve as a general guide.

Emerging

The emerging church stream maintains the earliest name, though this name has certainly become alienated and alienating over the years. In general, this movement derived from pastors and leaders who were dissatisfied with the ecclesial approaches of their particular church or with their general movement, such as Evangelicalism. While there were some early attempts to form a “church within a church” as a response, for the most part these attempts were unsuccessful and led to new church plants with independent goals. This stream, then, tends to focus on issues related to the field of practical theology, and can be considered a church renewal stream. While there may be early leaders—some of whom have left behind this label—there is not a particular founder or even a set of founders. Rather, the impulses that led to a more cohesive conversation developed seemingly independently in different parts of the country.³³

At this point, an important and relevant work on this topic is *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement*.³⁴ This is the published dissertation of Tony Jones, one

33. This statement is derived from my specific experiences, as well as consideration of the movement’s early development as related in appendix 2 of Gibbs and Bolger, which gives brief biographical information about early leaders.

34. Tony Jones, *The Church Is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011).

of the key early and continuing leaders in the emerging church movement. In this book, Jones looks specifically at five emerging communities, with the goal of assessing their ecclesiology and then putting this in conversation with Jürgen Moltmann's relational ecclesiology. At first glance, this may seem to invalidate the originality of this present work, given the nature of both Jones's conversation partners and his main thesis about the relationality of the church. However, Jones was working within a practical theology framework, leading his work to be more descriptive and sociological in scope. While he does some focused work on Moltmann's ecclesiology, this is somewhat limited. In addition, he tends to dismiss Moltmann's rising interest in both charismatic and liberation ecclesiologies as being naïve.³⁵ This supposed naïveté will be important for my own proposal; thus I will offer a substantive implicit response in my own work.

This is not to dismiss Jones's work, as it is, as a whole, a very worthwhile and helpful text, especially in terms of providing an overview of the current emerging church movement, defining it as a new social movement and aligning it with Moltmann's relational ecclesiology. We agree on the fact that Moltmann offers a constructive proposal for an ecclesiological framework for emerging and other transformative churches, sharing a goal if not a method or focus. Jones's dissertation, as well as his other useful texts, will serve as significant resource.³⁶ Indeed, as Jones has contributed such

35. *Ibid.*, 149–50. Jones, 151–52, goes on to note that this naïveté leads to an uncritical idealism by Moltmann. And this idealism leads to problems with people putting his theology into practice. Jürgen Moltmann, interview with the author, Tübingen, Germany, May 18, 47:25 responds to such criticism. Jones, *The Church Is Flat*, 152 goes on to note that no churches have followed his ecclesiology, and “he has failed to find exemplary communities that have actually practiced his ecclesiology.” Jürgen Moltmann, interview with the author, Tübingen, Germany, May 18, 51:20, asks that if I want to know his vision of the church, how it is to be worked out in practice, that I should study the Jakobuskirche in Tübingen. This is his “vision of the future of the church.” He goes on to add, “Not from the past, not from the objects, but from the subjects.”

significant research on the history and research on the emerging churches, his book is one of the most important texts on the literature and expression of the emerging church stream at present.³⁷ By emphasizing the transformative church as a charismatic, liberation community and by exploring these themes primarily from a systematic theological perspective, however, I will be taking these themes in a different direction.

Another useful text is *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emerging Churches*, edited by Robert Webber.³⁸ Here, Webber gives an excellent introduction to the history of emerging churches, and indeed renewal movements in general, then hands over the discussion to five emerging church leaders, or at least those who were known as such at the time. This is useful as it allows each leader to respond to key theological issues, then gives the other leaders space to respond to each other. These leaders are on a spectrum of theological belief, ranging from more conservative to more liberal. At least one, Mark Driscoll, now openly rejects the emerging church.³⁹

While interesting and certainly useful, *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emerging Church* tends to see the emerging church as offering different answers to the standard ecclesial and theological questions, and so shapes the book in a way as to solicit responses to these standard questions—thus, in a way, pigeonholing them into preestablished categories. This is a deficient approach as the emerging church is not simply another mode of expression of either liberal or conservative churches but rather, at its core, is coming to the issues of church and theology with oftentimes very different questions

36. Of these other writings the most important is likely Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

37. See Jones, *The Church Is Flat*, ch. 1 for both a substantive discussion of definitions of the emerging church and an up-to-date survey of the literature relating to the emerging church.

38. Robert Webber, ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

39. We can even see the reasons why clearly developing in his contributions here.

and thus very different answers to these questions. Topics such as the inerrancy of Scripture, which continues to be a major topic in Evangelical circles, is not really an issue with transformative churches, which tend to be more pre-modern in their use of Scripture.⁴⁰

Many other books fit into the emerging stream, such as Danielle Shroyer's Moltmann-inspired *The Boundary Breaking God*, or any of the numerous texts by Doug Pagitt, or the more activist and practically minded text *Everyday Justice: The Global Impact of Our Daily Choices* by Julie Clawson.⁴¹ In general, as it stands at this point, the emerging church should be understood as the more progressive theologically and more politically engaged stream, tending to be the most polarizing as it seems to reflect "progressive" positions on topics that tend to be reactionary against popular Evangelicalism.⁴² As such, early leaders such as Dan Kimball have intentionally stepped away from the terminology not because they have changed their methods or goals, but because it became too much effort to defend the sometimes totalizing rhetoric of other participants in the movement.⁴³

Missional

Related to the emerging church discussion in many ways, and as such included within the scope of my particular interests, is the missional

40. Emerging churches tend to be very comfortable with a narrative reading of Scripture in which it is accepted as it is, without requiring more closely defined definitions of its authority.

41. Danielle Shroyer, *The Boundary-Breaking God: An Unfolding Story of Hope and Promise* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009); Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice: The Global Impact of Our Daily Choices* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

42. In this way, this stream tends to be very much aligned with Moltmann's own political contributions, both his political theology and his political involvement in Germany.

43. See, for example, Dan Kimball, "Wheaton College and Positive Things About the Emerging Church," DanKimball.com, entry posted January 22, 2010, <http://dankimball.com/just-got-back-from-a-really-great-time-at-wheaton-college-i-was-there-for-a-2-day-event-put-on-by-the-christian-ethics-cente/>.