

Presbymergent and The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Reuben St. Louis

Knox College

TSX 3333H

Stuart Macdonald

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While reading about the Emergent Church Movement (ECM), I came across an article written by Adam Walker Cleaveland entitled “Presbymergent: The story of one mainliner’s quest to be a loyal radical.”¹ In this article, he seeks to share why he is both Emergent and Presbyterian, and he is not the only one. A recent book called *The Hyphenateds: How emergence Christianity is re-traditioning mainline practices* shares the stories of thirteen church leaders who define themselves as ‘Hyphenated Christians’, a hybrid between mainline and Emergent (i.e., Methomergent, Anglimergent, Luthermergent or Presbymergent). There seems to be a growing number of people within mainline traditions who are resonating with the ECM and seeking to combine their beliefs and practices with their own mainline tradition. For example, there is enough presence of Presbymergents in the PC(USA) that they have a gathering during their General Assembly and a website connecting Presbymergents across the country.

The pairing of Emergent and Presbyterian is odd as Emergent seems to go against the grain of the Presbyterian tradition. For example, Emergents are suspicious of institutions and typically anti-denominational. The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) cannot deny its institutional nature. Part of this anti-institutionalism is the mistrust of hierarchical authority. Yet, in the Presbyterian system there is a sophisticated hierarchy of authority. Emergents also seem to be hesitant to make absolute truth claims but to be a minister in the PCC you need to agree to certain beliefs (*Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Living Faith* as subordinate standards). Furthermore, Diana Butler Bass, in her research on vibrant mainline churches (which I would say are examples of Hyphenated churches) remarked “they almost appear to be religious independents – rather loosely attached to the formal structures of established religion.”² Would

¹ Adam Walker Cleaveland, “Presbymergent: The story of one mainliner’s quest to be a loyal radical,” in *An Emergent Manifesto Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

² Diana Butler-Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 253.

this not be a problem in the PCC because of our Presbyterian system of government? Not only are there rules and guidelines about attendance at meetings and financial support for Presbyterians Sharing but the strength of Presbytery lies in full participation from congregations. On the surface there is much that is inconsistent between Presbyterians and Emergents. Is it actually possible to be ‘Presbymergent’? What reasons would someone have for having one foot in the denomination and the other in the ECM? Furthermore, is there any motivation for the PCC to pursue and nurture a relationship with those who identify as Presbymergent? These are the questions I wish to explore with the purpose of suggesting a posture for the PCC to take toward Presbymergents and the ECM.

With this in mind, I will begin with a brief history of the ECM and then proceed to describe the movement in terms of six areas of belief and practice. Brian McLaren’s book *A Generous Orthodoxy* is considered by many to be the handbook for the ECM. Tony Jones writes “[McLaren’s] bestselling book has been both descriptive of and prescriptive for many in the ECM.”³ Therefore, McLaren will act as the primary voice of the ECM. However, the ECM, as pointed out by many, is a mixed bag. Therefore, included in my research are Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger who wrote *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian community in postmodern cultures*. This book is an early attempt (2005) to define what makes a church emergent. Tony Jones’ more recent (2012) book *The Church is Flat: The relational ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* will also be considered as it attempts to provide a theological lens through which to view the ECM. Finally, Diana Butler Bass’ research into vibrant mainline congregations will provide examples of how ECM beliefs and practices manifest in hyphenated congregations.

³ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 114.

The ECM also has its critics, therefore I will engage the major criticisms of this movement, particularly the claim that the ECM has fallen into relativism. One particular critic that will be reviewed is D.A. Carson. His critique is relevant because he comes out of the same tradition as the ECM (conservative evangelical). Since the ECM's history has been more reactionary toward the traditions that spawned them, it is helpful to hear from the other side of the coin. Also, Carson particularly takes aim at McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* thus providing an easy comparison of their two views.

Following this, a fuller picture of Presbytermergents will be provided including what motivates them to occupy two different worlds. This section will rely on the work of Michael Clawson and his research on the history of the Presbytermergent movement in PC(USA). The key motivation for Presbytermergents is a desire for a vital, relevant expression of the church that takes seriously the Presbyterian tradition. The particular areas identified by Presbytermergents which are in need of renewal include: doctrine, interfaith dialogue, membership, ordination, community, and worship. These issues correspond with the six areas of belief and practice identified in the ECM. Presbytermergents see the continuing decline of mainline denominations as evidence for the need of renewal. This assertion will lead to a discussion about the reasons for decline from both an Emergent and conservative position.

The ECM would cite cultural irrelevance as the reason for decline, particularly with respect to postmodernism. The solution would then be for the church to adapt to our changing culture in ways that address a postmodern worldview. However, utilizing the work of Roger Finke and Rodney Stark as well as Dean Kelley's theory of the decline of the mainline, the ECM's proposal for the mainline churches will be challenged, critiqued and finally harmonized with Finke and Stark's conclusions. What this will prove is that no matter which way one

understands the reasons for the decline of mainline denominations, the ECM has much to contribute to the conversation about renewing our ecclesiastical structures.

Next, those issues identified by Presbytermergents will be addressed by putting the beliefs and practices of the ECM into dialogue with the Presbyterian tradition. The resulting tension will be analyzed in conjunction with David Bosch and his book *Transforming Mission: Paradigm shifts in theology and mission*. Bosch is an apt theologian to address these two bodies as he comes out of the reformed tradition and is highly respected by those in the ECM. This process will provide a theological foundation for Presbytermergents to stand on within the PCC.

My final conclusion will be that due to the shared values between the PCC and the ECM, it is reasonable that a hybrid (i.e., Presbytermergent) between the two is possible. Any tensions that are created in the process will only encourage healthy dialogue regarding key issues within the denomination. If, as suggested above, Presbytermergent is a viable and appropriate response to the current and alarming decline of the denomination, then my main proposal would be for the denomination to create space for Presbytermergents, providing them support, encouragement and partnership in ministry.

A brief history of the Emergent Church Movement

The Emergent Church Movement originally came out of a desire in the 1990s among Protestant Christians (US and UK) to reach Gen-Xers with the gospel. In response to the exodus of Gen-Xers from the church, a ‘Young Leaders Network’ was formed in 1997. This included prominent and innovative young leaders from both evangelical and mainline churches. The purpose was to assist the wider church in reaching out to a younger generation. However, what began as a generational approach to ministry soon shifted to focus on postmodern culture and

how Christianity should relate to it. The Young Leaders Network initiative culminated with the release of *A New Kind of Christian* by Brian McLaren in 2001. Jones calls this the first phase of the Emergent Church Movement.⁴

The second phase began with the rising tension between the Young Leaders Network (YLN) and its parent organization, Leaders Network. According to Jones, the content of discussion among the YLN and their criticism of the modern evangelical church led to a parting of ways and the YLN formed “Emergent Village.”⁵ The movement saw much growth in popularity characterized by a proliferation of book releases and conferences. Much to the protest of many evangelical leaders, McLaren was named one of the top 40 evangelical leaders in the US in 2004. However, by this point, tensions within the movement itself began to surface between those with a more traditional theology calling themselves ‘emerging’ and those with a more progressive theology calling themselves ‘emergent.’⁶ This split meant a distancing of evangelicals from the left-moving ‘Emergent Village’, which also happened to coincide with its discovery by mainliners who began to label themselves as Presbymergent, Anglimergent and Luthermergent. This mainline interest in the movement is one mark of the third and current phase of the ECM.⁷ While some question the continued relevance of the movement, Jones resists the notion that the ECM has been made irrelevant by the adopting, adapting or dismissal of what made it radically different. He writes that the ECM “is arguably still one of the most potent reform movements within the modern church.”⁸

⁴ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 45-46.

⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁸ Ibid., 50.

Emergent Church Movement Practices and Beliefs

What makes a person or congregation ‘Emergent’? This is difficult to define. Jones suggests that this is because “it is a young movement that is still rapidly evolving and because its adherents regularly defy the definitions put upon them by observers and scholars.”⁹ Therefore, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that any definition of the ECM will fail to adequately describe the movement as a whole. Despite this challenge, Jones, Ryan Bolger and Eddie Gibbs have tried to study the congregations associated with this movement to find similarities that might begin to give a sense of the defining contours that describe this movement. Jones suggests that the best definition is from the *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*:

The emerging church movement is a loosely aligned conversation among Christians who seek to re-imagine the priorities, values and theology expressed by the local church as it seeks to live out its faith in postmodern society. It is an attempt to replot Christian faith on a new cultural and intellectual terrain.¹⁰

To elucidate this definition, I will outline six beliefs and related practices of the ECM that I believe are particularly relevant to the PCC context. To do this I will use McLaren’s *Generous Orthodoxy* as his book has been influential for the ECM. Furthermore, Gibbs and Bolger’s nine practices of emerging churches, Jones’ investigation of the ECM’s core practices and Diana Bulter-Bass’ study of ten practices of vibrant mainline congregations will be connected with McLaren’s theology.

A Generous Orthodoxy

Just by reading the full title of McLaren’s book (*A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/calvinist, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian*) you get a feel for

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

one key feature in the ECM. Jones summarizes it by noting: “Emergents find little importance in the discrete differences between the various flavors of Christianity. Instead, they practice a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contributions of all Christian movements.”¹¹ What McLaren does in his book is pick and choose from what he sees to be the best in each ‘brand’ of Christianity. For example, McLaren paints, in broad strokes, the images of Jesus he has encountered in different Christian traditions. He then asks “Why not celebrate them all?”¹² At the root of this question is a critique of the sectarianism and polarization in both Christianity and society at large.

This critique was taken up by McLaren in his earlier book *A New Kind of Christian: A tale of two friends on a spiritual journey*. The two main characters in this fictional story (Dan and Neo) have several conversations about an imaginary line on which the various denominations stand theologically (i.e., liberals on the left and conservatives on the right). McLaren does not define a new kind of Christian (or an Emergent Christian) as somewhere on the line, but as a point hovering above the old dichotomies of left and right. Dan finally gets this point later in the story: “Kingdom of the heavens – a kingdom that is higher than the earth. Neo, it’s just like your line in the dust! The Kingdom of God transcends the normal level of discourse. I get it! It’s up here.”¹³

In the vibrant mainline congregations studied by Bass in her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*, she finds evidence of the rejection of dichotomies of left and right. One of the pastors described congregational diversity as “a polyculture of the Spirit – different ways of being Christian, each with an inherent integrity

¹¹ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 8.

¹² Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 74.

¹³ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A tale of two friends on a spiritual journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 107.

and vitality.”¹⁴ Another church member in the study said: “It’s not just a matter of tolerating differences or accepting difference; it’s appreciating differences for the richness that they bring to our community.”¹⁵ When McLaren was being introduced at a youth workers’ convention, the emcee asked the audience: “How many of you wish there could be a third alternative, something beyond the confining boxes of liberal and conservative? [To McLaren’s] surprise, the room erupted with applause and cheers.”¹⁶ McLaren is described as a pilgrim seeking this alternative way and the same can be said for the ECM.¹⁷

Interfaith Dialogue

The generous orthodoxy of the ECM is a response to one aspect of modernity. McLaren describes modernity as a ‘critical age’, writing: “If you believe that you absolutely, objectively know the absolute, objective truth, and you know this with absolute certainty, then of course you must debunk anyone who sees differently from you.”¹⁸ The ECM rejects this attitude not only within Christianity as demonstrated above but also with other religions. As an ‘incarnational’ Christian, McLaren states: “I am bound to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, atheists, New Agers, everyone [...]. Not only am I bound to them in love, but I am also actually called to, in some real sense [...], become one of them, to enter their world and be with them in it.”¹⁹ Despite this posture towards other religions, the ECM has not embodied it as fully as it could.

Jones points out that the ECM has had little experience with interfaith dialogue but believes that this is an area in which the ECM needs to grow. He writes: “The ECM has an opportunity to forge a type of inter-religious relation that [...] maintains a robust Christian

¹⁴ Diana Bulter Bass, *Christianity for the rest of us: How the neighborhood church is transforming the faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 145.

¹⁵ Ibid., 154.

¹⁶ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 145.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A tale of two friends on a spiritual journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 17.

¹⁹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 282.

identity while remaining truly open to the life of the other.”²⁰ Like Jones, Gibbs and Bolger believe the ECM to be in an ideal position for dialogue because of the different attitude Emergents have toward their non-Christian friends:

Because of their confidence in Jesus, members of emerging churches venture out and truly listen to those of other faiths and even seek to be evangelized by them. They no longer feel that they need to argue for the faith. Instead, they believe their lives speak much louder than their words.²¹

Both of the above views support what McLaren is advocating for in terms of Christianity’s relationship with other religions. The key word that McLaren uses to describe this relationship is ‘humility’.

Belonging before believing

Hospitality is one key practice of the ECM according to Jones, Gibbs and Bolger and Bass. Hospitality and inclusion are also important practices for McLaren. He uses the word ‘catholic’ to illustrate what hospitality means:

[T]o be catholic means to find another joy: the pleasure of accepting and welcoming the poor, the blind, the stumbling, the crippled, the imperfect, the confused, the mistaken, and the different. It doesn’t mean that we lower our standards of authentic discipleship, rather that we raise our standards of Christ-like acceptance.²²

This radical acceptance provides the foundation for a hospitality that puts belonging first.

The church under modernity sees belonging as dependent on believing. Right belief begets right behaviour and only then do you belong to the community. Emergents disagree and therefore have reordered these aspects of faith. Bass sees this shift happening in the wider culture

²⁰ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 172.

²¹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 134.

²² Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 253.

and describes it as “the shape of awakened Christianity.”²³ She offers the illustration of someone learning to knit to demonstrate the transformation that takes place by first belonging, then behaving and then believing:

The first step in becoming a knitter is forming a relationship with knitters. The next step is to learn by doing and practice. After you knit for a while, after you have made scarves and hats and mittens, then you start forming ideas about knitting. [...] In knitting, the process is exactly the reverse of that in church: belonging to a knitting group leads to behaving as a knitter, which leads to believing things about knitting.²⁴

If belonging is the place where Emergents begin, then it is not surprising that hospitality is an essential practice for the ECM. But many churches desire and claim to offer hospitality to others. How is the hospitality in the ECM different from other churches?

In Jones’ research, two things stand out in regards to hospitality in the ECM: (1) people felt engaged and valued for what they brought to the community and (2) hospitality was seen as a virtue.²⁵ First, the way ECM congregations encourage participation in the community is a key part to the connected feeling that is felt by visitors. Second, as a virtue, hospitality is less of a program and more of a way of being. Jones uses the example of two lesbians who felt welcomed at an ECM congregation, not because of a pride flag or a statement posted on a website, but because of “a hospitality that is more ingrained into the very heart” of the congregation.²⁶ Bass accentuates the difference between these two approaches by lamenting when well-meaning Christians take the ten practices she argues are revitalizing the mainline and turn them into a ten-step program.²⁷ She borrows Nouwen’s definition of hospitality as “the creation of a free space”

²³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 214.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁵ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 111-113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁷ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 167.

where strangers become friends. As she says, “Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.”²⁸ Too often hospitality programs come off as a way to get outsiders to join the church. For the ECM, hospitality is an end in and of itself.

One way in which the practice of hospitality is lived out is in the sacrament of communion. What makes communion distinct in the ECM is that often these congregations have communion every week. This is quite a shift from the evangelical roots of the ECM where communion is generally celebrated only quarterly. For Gibbs and Bolger, this shift has a great deal to do with hospitality.

The ethos of [communion] is one of hospitality, and all are invited to the table. At times, the eucharistic celebration takes place in a home or café setting. This enables a group to demonstrate hospitality in a culturally appropriate manner.²⁹

Priesthood of all believers

One of the hallmarks of post-modernism is a suspicion towards authority figures. For the ECM this means a flattening of all hierarchical structures of authority. The theological foundation for this is ‘the priesthood of all believers.’ It is strange that this idea is not addressed specifically by McLaren in *A Generous Orthodoxy*. However, it is addressed by Jones and others and is particularly relevant for the PCC.

Jones writes: “In contrast to traditional mainline ecclesial structures, the ECM churches have a ‘lower’ view of ordination, or a ‘higher’ view of lay involvement. Or both.”³⁰ Yet, he is quick to point out that this is not because of a disdain for seminary training but “as a result of the egalitarian and relational ecclesiology that these leaders are attempting to cultivate.”³¹ To

²⁸ Diana Bulter Bass, *Christianity for the rest of us: How the neighborhood church is transforming the faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 79.

²⁹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 119.

³⁰ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 118.

³¹ Ibid.

support this relational ecclesiology, Jones points to Moltmann's understanding of the social trinity. Instead of seeing the Trinity as containing an inner hierarchy where the Father is over and above the Son and the Spirit, God is a community of mutual self-giving.

The notion of the priesthood of all believers can be found concretely in two distinct areas within the ECM: worship and polity. First, in worship, Gibbs and Bolger describe Emergents as producers. This word is used specifically in opposition to a modern way of viewing worshippers as consumers. Gibbs and Bolger describe the result of mixing consumerism and spirituality:

“Rather than focusing on God, spiritual consumers turned attention on themselves as they sought spiritual goods to help them construct a life with minimal commitment or belief requirements.”³²

The ‘seeker’ model of church is one example of this type of spiritual consumerism. Instead of sitting back and receiving the spiritual goods being offered in worship,

Emerging churches demonstrate a high level of participation at their worship gatherings [...]. The extent of the participation of each person in worship is not confined to predetermined congregational responses. Rather, participation includes the full range of activities that make up a worship event.³³

Testimony is one example of this type of participation and is one of the ten practices Bass found in her vibrant church communities. For Bass, testimony is not sharing about the day and hour when someone became a Christian. Instead, it is about telling the story of people's lives. Upon revisiting one of the congregations she studied, Bass confesses only being able to conjure up the testimony of a woman she heard on her initial visit rather than the preaching. Testimony is just one way for the laity to participate as producers.

For Jones, the practice of participating as producers is best exemplified in the dialogical sermon. Whether it is incorporating a team approach to the exegesis of scripture or writing a

³² Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 157.

³³ *Ibid.*, 172.

sermon online that allows for communal editing or facilitating discussion during the actual sermon, these practices result in preaching that is anything but monological. Even the way technology is used contributes to the living out of the priesthood of all believers. Emergents are known for their technological prowess and are experimenting with real-time Twitter feeds on display during the sermon.

In regards to polity and church governance, Gibbs and Bolger describe the ECM leadership as “leading as a body.”³⁴ They contrast this with the modern notion of control. McLaren writes: “Modern people have dedicated themselves to controlling people, results, risks, economies, experiments, profit margins, variables, nature, even the weather.”³⁵ However, dismantling this aspect of modernity has its consequences. Letting go of control means things get messy. This is what the ECM has experienced with their experiments with leaderless groups. Gibbs and Bolger share a few examples of how these experiments were unsuccessful. It is evident that the experience of controlling leadership characteristic of modernity pushed these churches too far in the other direction. Pastors in these congregations have realized that there will always be a need for leaders in any group. ECM congregations have evolved as they grew from leaderless groups to open leadership, where anyone is welcome and finally to a community of leaders which is more representative. However, wherever ECM congregations are in their evolution, certain values stay the same, like leadership based on gifts, congregational agenda setting and consensus decision making.

A large part of leadership in a congregation is the practice of discernment. Bass writes: “Discernment is a gift to the whole of the Christian community, one that can be strengthened and

³⁴ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 191.

³⁵ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A tale of two friends on a spiritual journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 16.

nurtured by engaging the practice. [...] It is easy to understand discernment as an individual process, but in the study congregations, discernment was also a corporate practice.”³⁶

Empowering and involving the wider congregation into the practice of discernment demonstrates the notion of the priesthood of all believers. One of the congregations Bass visited began incorporating the practice of discernment first as a “lay-led process.”³⁷ This focus on the guidance of the community instead of the clergy is consistent with what Gibbs and Bolger have identified as leading as a body.

With the above in mind, Jones picks up on another characteristic of the ECM which Gibbs and Bolger have missed. He writes: “It cannot be ignored that the strong personality and leadership styles of [the] founding pastors have played a significant role in the rise of their church to a place of national prominence.”³⁸ This may have been missed by Gibbs and Bolger because their sampling was of leaders in the ECM who may have been reluctant to point to their own charisma in building up these congregations. So while the ideal of the priesthood of all believers is a key practice, the need for a ‘transformational’ leader is important.

Even though McLaren does not specifically comment on the priesthood of all believers, the egalitarian and participatory nature of the ECM as demonstrated suggests an addition is needed to the denominational adjectives to his book title. I would recommend ‘Presbyterian’ as the egalitarianism of Presbyterian polity speaks to the importance of the voice of the community, not just the individual.

³⁶ Diana Bulter Bass, *Christianity for the rest of us: How the neighborhood church is transforming the faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁸ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 77.

Community

Turning now from the governance of the church community to the community itself, Gibbs and Bolger describe the ECM as living “highly communal lives.”³⁹ While there is much that can be said positively about why this should be, it is not a coincidence that a post-modern church would embrace a strong sense of community in reaction to the rampant individualism associated with modernity. McLaren writes: “The modern era moved inexorably from a focus on ‘we’ to a focus on ‘me.’ Never have individuals been so ‘free’ of all social constraints and connection as they are in late modernity. Not surprisingly, never have they felt so alienated and isolated.”⁴⁰

It is in the tradition of the Anabaptist where McLaren sees the remedy to this isolation. “[Anabaptists] realize that community involves proximity, and that proximity involves land, and that our ties to one another can never be separated from our ties to the land, the watershed, the local economy in which we live.”⁴¹ Correspondingly, a typical ECM congregation is quite small. Gibbs and Bolger write: “The basic structure of emerging churches must remain small because of the high commitment to relationships.”⁴² This commitment to relationships means that church members usually live close to each other or in communal housing. They work together, eat together and play together. ‘Church’ for the ECM is not confined to a meeting or building but occurs whenever two or three are gathered. Church is more of a rhythm of life. Jones writes: “The Sunday-Monday gap that many clergypersons bemoan is virtually unknown, or at least not mentioned, in the ECM. [Members] spend an inordinate amount of time with one another

³⁹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 45.

⁴⁰ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A tale of two friends on a spiritual journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 18.

⁴¹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 233.

⁴² Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 109.

throughout the week, at bars and work as well as in church on Sunday.”⁴³ Some do not even show up on Sunday but are still part of the community in other ways. This is characteristic of the shift from church as meeting to church as relationship.

There is another aspect of community inherent in the ECM which Jones encountered. As mentioned above, Emergents have a knack for using technology and they use it to relate to each other online. Using online forums, Twitter, Facebook, blogs and other social media, the ECM communities include people who, for whatever reason, cannot be present in person. It is through these tools that the ECM has become a movement, a conversation and a network of friends.

Beauty in Worship

The final practice that is relevant for this discussion is the practice of beauty. McLaren sees this practice of beauty exemplified in the liturgy of the Anglican church. He writes: “The Anglican way [...] has been to begin with beauty, to focus on beauty, and to stay with it, believing that where beauty is, God is.”⁴⁴ Now, whether one believes that Anglican liturgy is worthy of such a description or not, the point McLaren is trying to make is that beauty is just as important as “fine points of doctrine.”⁴⁵ The modern age was marked by the pursuit of truth through objectivity. The arts were not considered serious partners in this pursuit. However, as Jones writes, “Emergents will use all of the means available to them to quest after this truth we call God. They’ll use their rational intellects, [...] [b]ut they’ll also use media of beauty, like art, music, and poetry.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 165.

⁴⁴ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 236.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 159.

Jones, Bass and Gibbs and Bolger all encountered many examples of the practice of beauty in their research. Bass called the congregations she visited a “symphony of creativity.”⁴⁷ Someone painting on canvas during a sermon, the display of original artwork in the church, visiting art stations prior to worship and a variety of music and instruments all serve to make beauty a part of the worship of God. Gibbs and Bolger report that in the ECM “the creation of art directed toward God is in itself worship.”⁴⁸ It should be noted that the incorporation of art has much to do with the fact that the ECM by its nature is more appealing to “the cultural creative class of younger [...] Christians.”⁴⁹ However, through ‘playfulness’, even those who do not see themselves as particularly creative (especially when compared to any highly talented professionals in the congregation) can feel comfortable in joining in the practice of beauty and know that their contribution is valued.⁵⁰

There is, of course, more that could be said about the beliefs and practices of the ECM. I chose these particular characteristics for two reasons: first, because they are core practices which are identified by those studying this movement and second, because I believe they are relevant to the PCC. This relevance will be explored later.

Critique of the Emergent Church Movement

Having given a portrait of the ECM through their beliefs and practices, it is appropriate to acknowledge some of the criticism aimed at the ECM and particularly McLaren. Most of this criticism comes from conservative evangelicals. The focus of this critique will centre on D.A.

⁴⁷ Diana Bulter Bass, *Christianity for the rest of us: How the neighborhood church is transforming the faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 214.

⁴⁸ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 177.

⁴⁹ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 118.

⁵⁰ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 182.

Carson's *Becoming conversant with the Emergent Church*. As an evangelical, he is best suited to defend that which the ECM has been most critical of in the conservative evangelical camp. Also, he particularly targets McLaren and his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* as representative of the ECM. Therefore, he will be able to provide another perspective on what I have discussed above.

Carson's first critique of the ECM is its reductionist view of modernity and postmodernity.⁵¹ In other words, history is not as clear cut as McLaren seems to be making it. McLaren does not deny this. However, we are all guilty of reduction. I have chosen to focus on McLaren as representative of a diverse movement; Carson has chosen to do the same. These are both reductions. But is McLaren's discussion of modernity as reductionist as Carson claims? There are ten characteristics of modernity described by McLaren, and Carson has only fixated on one, 'absolute objectivity', as the defining mark of modernism.⁵² It would seem that Carson has a more reductionist view than McLaren.

In regards to a reductionist view of postmodernity, Carson accuses McLaren of using postmodernity as another word for cultural change.⁵³ This is a picky point. The important thing is not whether these cultural changes are 'postmodern' (a term which is difficult to define) but how these changes are affecting the church. What the ECM is reacting to is real and the church needs to respond to these cultural changes however we define them.

According to Carson, not only is the ECM's view of modernism reductionistic but they have similarly painted the church under modernism in the same broad strokes. This prompts Carson to chastise the ECM for being critical of previous generations of Christians, particularly

⁵¹ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 59, 75.

⁵² Ibid., 92-95.

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

evangelicals.⁵⁴ However, regardless of the hyperbole in McLaren's writing, the real question is whether his critique of the modern church has any validity?

Darrell Guder, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, agrees with McLaren's read on the modern church's tendencies towards individualism and consumerism. Regarding individualism in the church he writes: "The assumption has seemed to be that by training leaders professionally to meet the personal, spiritual needs of the individual, the church could reacquire relevance at the cultural center. This assumption has proved not to be the case."⁵⁵ Furthermore, he points to the churches' accommodation of a consumer culture: "The nature of leadership [has been] [...] transformed into the management of an organization shaped to meet the spiritual needs of consumers and maximize market penetration for numerical growth."⁵⁶ The general observation is that the church in the modern age allied itself with modernity in a way that, in hindsight, is problematic particularly in regards to the rise of postmodernity. However, this leads to the heart of the major critique of the ECM which is that, like the modern church, it too has accommodated itself too readily to postmodern culture.

Much of Carson's critique of the ECM centres on absolutism versus relativity. For Carson, there are no absolutes in the postmodern view. He calls this 'hard postmodernism' which he argues is self-defeating because the statement 'there are no absolutes' is itself an absolute.⁵⁷ This lack of absolutes means that the ECM is "awash in [...] relativism" which is at the heart of many other accusations including that Emergents are morally lax, non-Biblical and

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁵ Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 197.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 198.

⁵⁷ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 109.

Universalists.⁵⁸ Thus, by addressing the issue of relativism, these other important issues of ethics, the Bible and salvation will also be addressed.

Carson suggests that ‘moderns’ are not so naïve as to think that they can objectively or omnisciently know something in its entirety. However, he does believe that through study it is possible to know something better. He turns the hermeneutical circle into a spiral where every time one goes around, one is closer to the truth.⁵⁹ His observation is that Emergents have failed to “come to terms with the importance of non-omniscient truth-claims.”⁶⁰ Yet, just as he decries the ECM for suggesting that ‘moderns’ do not understand differences of perspective, Carson has misrepresented the ECM suggesting that ‘anything goes’. Jones agrees:

Emergents are pretty humble about the positions we hold today and about the issues that we consider most important. However, humility does not breed apathy. We have all sorts of strongly held positions about all sorts of things, and we’ll be happy to debate anything from the atonement to national politics to bioethics.⁶¹

When it comes to truth, Jones writes: “We make the best choice that we can at a particular point in time, with all of the evidence we can muster, and we live into that choice.”⁶² So to say that the ECM has no morals or that they are unbiblical or that they are universalists (i.e., it does not matter what you believe) is irresponsible.

In conclusion, the ECM’s understanding of postmodernism may be eclectic in nature; however, this does not invalidate the movement’s critique of modernity. Also, despite the ECM’s reductionist view of evangelicals as absolutists, they too cannot be reduced to the status of relativists. The question that remains is whether the ECM’s response to our changing culture is a

⁵⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 118-119.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁶¹ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 116.

⁶² Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 122.

responsible one? We now turn to this question and a discussion of the motivations behind the Presbymergent movement.

Presbymergents and Church Decline

Having outlined the beliefs and practices of the ECM, I now turn to what it means to be a ‘Hyphenated’ Christian or a ‘Presbymergent’. Bob Hopkins coined the term ‘loyal radicals’ in describing the hyphenateds. Their commitment to working in the tradition is what makes them loyal and their Emergent beliefs and practices make them radical. Mike Clawson is a PhD student in Religion and Historical Studies at Baylor University. In his paper *Loyal Radicals: The Intersection of Mainline Denominations and Emerging Christianity*, he outlines a fuller picture of each of these qualities for Presbymergents.

Clawson suggests four particular ways in which Presbymergents are loyal to the Presbyterian tradition. First, the Reformation cry of ‘reformed and always reforming’ is of particular importance. In many ways it justifies the reforms which Presbymergents would like to make. Even Emergents outside the Presbyterian tribe affirm this part of the reformed tradition. It is one of the reasons why McLaren can call himself a Calvinist.⁶³ Second, the breadth of theological diversity among Presbyterians resonates with this group (1) because they themselves are theologically different and (2) because they believe that a diversity of voices makes for better theology. Third, Presbymergents appreciate the value placed on theological education not just for clergy but for all. There is a cerebral quality in both preaching and teaching within the Presbyterian tradition best exemplified by the name given to ministers as ‘teaching’ elders. Finally, and most uniquely, Presbymergents are loyal to their tradition because of the importance placed on community. This is not surprising since, as noted above, community is highly valued

⁶³ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 205.

among Emergents. In many ways, Presbymergents could find denominations which embody the first three mentioned above but what makes Presbyterians distinct is our communal polity.

Presbymergents are also radicals. Again, Clawson points out a few particular areas where Presbymergents are stretching the bounds of the Presbyterian tradition. First, Presbymergents, like their Emergent kin in other traditions, embrace a theological and religious plurality. Dialogue is extended outside denominational bounds to engage others in conversation including Emergents, Hyphenateds and other religions. Second, they “embrace [...] new spiritual and liturgical practices.”⁶⁴ In this embrace, there is also a critique which notices that there are many people for “whom traditional forms of Presbyterian worship are wholly irrelevant.”⁶⁵ Therefore, Presbymergents seek to re-purpose and adapt the liturgical tradition. Third, even though Presbyterian polity is not foreign to Emergent sensibilities with its focus on representative democracy, there is much in Presbyterian polity which Presbymergents would like to reshape. Clawson cites issues around ordination, parliamentary procedures and a narrow understanding of church forms.⁶⁶ Another polity issue is membership. One Presbymergent congregation has tried three times to implement a traditional approach to membership and failed.⁶⁷ This is not surprising because of the Emergent idea of belonging before believing which cringes at the idea of membership based on ascent to certain beliefs (believing before belonging). Finally, even though Presbymergents see community as a strong value in the Presbyterian tradition, they also see how individualism in the surrounding culture has undermined community within the church.

⁶⁴ Michael Clawson, *Loyal Radicals: The Intersection of Mainline Denominations and Emerging Christianity* (MATS Integrative Seminar, 2010), 38.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 39-40.

⁶⁷ Interview with Dylan Rooke, September 18, 2012. (Phone interview regarding Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community.)

In summary, the Presbytermergent critique of the mainline includes areas of doctrine, interfaith dialogue, membership, ordination, community and worship.

By and large, the Presbytermergent critique of the North American church is that they have failed to adapt to a changing culture. Evidence for this failure is in the overall decline of the church in North America and Europe and this includes the PCC. On average, worship attendance in the PCC is declining at a rate of 3% annually.⁶⁸ If a change in culture is the reason for this decline, then it makes sense that addressing this cultural change is necessary to reverse this trend. The ways that Presbytermergents have adapted from a modern to an increasingly postmodern culture is one approach to reversing church decline.

However, there are many theories as to why the church is in decline. In a seminar given by Bass, she joked that there are studies and statistics that can blame anything for the decline including the lack of drums in worship.⁶⁹ The first to question the notion that cultural change was responsible for the decline of the church was Dean Kelley in 1972 in his book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. Kelley was attempting to explain why mainline denominations had declined while conservative churches were still growing. His conclusion was that the mainline had lost their 'strictness' and accommodated themselves to the secular culture.⁷⁰ Even though Kelley suggests "from declining groups new movements spring, which may lend vitality to the old or may begin a new evolution or both"⁷¹, because Emergents do not meet his requirements

⁶⁸ Gordon Haynes, *Life and Mission Agency Research Project 2011-2012* (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2012), 8.

⁶⁹ Seminar on *Christianity After Religion* with Diana Bulter Bass, November 2-3, 2012. (Knox Presbyterian Church, Dundas ON.)

⁷⁰ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 174-175.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

for ‘strictness’,⁷² a Presbytermergent hybrid would only lead the Presbyterian denomination to further decline.

Another theory that tries to account for decline among mainline denominations is posited by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. According to them, what happened to the mainline denominations in America in the 20th century was “a gradual trend that has been going on for at least two centuries”⁷³; the upstart sects win while the mainliners lose. They have noted that throughout American religious history, one can see a natural decline of mainline denominations while new religious sects experience substantial growth. The reasons for this are similar to reasons suggested by Kelley’s. Finke and Stark suggest that growth has to do with the rewards of a costly faith. They write: “Over the past two hundred-plus years of American history it has been the costly sects that have shown the most rapid growth.”⁷⁴ This is because faith groups that require more participation, giving and allegiance end up having more benefits to bestow on their members.⁷⁵

If the above analysis is accurate, then the question arises: do Emergents qualify as having a costly (or in Kelley’s view, strict) faith? I would argue that while ‘strict’ might not be the best word to describe the ECM, there is evidence of Kelley’s traits of strictness in the movement (group solidarity, charismatic leadership and missionary zeal). According to Clawson and Bass, Presbytermergents should be seen in the same light. Clawson addresses this issue directly and notes that “while Kelley may be correct that ‘demanding’ churches grow, he was incorrect in simply

⁷² Ibid., 84.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 249-250.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 250.

equating ‘demanding’ with ‘conservative’ and failed to see that spiritual intentionality and rigorous commitment could be cultivated on the liberal side of the church as well.”⁷⁶

In the end, it should be noted that while Kelley and Finke and Stark’s theories may be accurate for the timeframe they are describing, it does not mean that they will hold true for the future. These theories describe the church within the framework of Christendom. In a recent seminar, Bass provided statistics that showed that the number of white Protestants in America had dipped below 50 percent for the first time. She was unconvinced that these theories would continue to hold in a post-Christendom North America.⁷⁷

In summary, whether we see mainline decline as the result of cultural change or like Kelley, and Finke and Stark, a loss in strictness, the ECM and more importantly Presbyterians can be seen as a valid response to the decline of the mainline. However, it should be noted that while Presbyterians are ‘loyal’ to the tradition, this loyalty does not extend to the institution. In other words, saving the institution of the church is not a priority for Presbyterians. The movement may “help the Presbyterian Church find its place in the 21st century”⁷⁸ but this may not include the renewal of the institution.

Furthermore, I believe that the practices and beliefs of the ECM and which Presbyterians embrace correspond to areas which are in most need of renewal in the PCC. These include doctrine, interfaith dialogue, membership, ordination, community and worship. Each will be discussed further but for now I will conclude with an observation made by Bass. In a recent seminar, she encouraged a group of Canadian mainliners by saying that they had a leg

⁷⁶ Michael Clawson, *Loyal Radicals: The Intersection of Mainline Denominations and Emerging Christianity* (MATS Integrative Seminar, 2010), 16.

⁷⁷ Seminar on *Christianity After Religion* with Diana Bulter Bass, November 2-3, 2012. (Knox Presbyterian Church, Dundas ON.)

⁷⁸ Michael Clawson, *Loyal Radicals: The Intersection of Mainline Denominations and Emerging Christianity* (MATS Integrative Seminar, 2010), 41.

up on American Protestants because they are just starting to wake up to the relativistic, pluralistic and individualistic culture around them. Canadians, on the other hand, have been ministering in such a context for decades.⁷⁹ This is the very culture which the ECM is trying to reach.

Therefore, I think it is possible that Canadian Presbyterians are more ready to embrace ECM beliefs and practices than we may realize. The difficulty will be in how to deal with the possible tensions that may arise between the tradition and these loyal radicals.

Emergents, Presbyterians and Bosch

As demonstrated above, Emergents and Presbyterians have areas of agreement but there are also areas wherein tensions arise. To frame and navigate these similarities and tensions, I will engage the work of missiologist David Bosch with the hope of coming to an understanding of the nature of these tensions and how they can be held together creatively.

A Living Faith

As mentioned above, Emergents embrace a variety of expressions of the Christian faith. Can the same be said for Presbyterians? Living Faith states: “The church is catholic. It is universal, including all people of all time who affirm the Christian Faith.”⁸⁰ It is important to notice that the church is not those who affirm the ‘Presbyterian Faith’ but the ‘Christian Faith’. Presbyterianism may be one expression of that faith but it is not the only one. Congram affirms this suggesting that “To be Presbyterian means, necessarily, to be involved with other Christians whom we recognize as brothers and sisters in Christ. It means playing our full role in the one, holy, catholic church.”⁸¹ This ecumenism is best exemplified in Presbyterians’ recognition of the

⁷⁹ Seminar on *Christianity After Religion* with Diana Bulter Bass, November 2-3, 2012. (Knox Presbyterian Church, Dundas ON.)

⁸⁰ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984) , 7.1.4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

baptisms of those from other denominations. This recognition is what McKim calls “an expression of the ultimate unity of the Christian church.”⁸² Many more examples could be given showing Presbyterians’ involvement in the ecumenical movement. Suffice to say, there is good reason why Presbyterians have found a home in our tradition and it has to do with our religious (or at least Christian) pluralism.

Bosch affirms the ecumenical movement. First, he recognizes the impact that the *missio Dei* has on our relationship to other denominations. “[T]he *missio Dei* notion has helped to articulate the conviction that neither the church nor any other human agent can ever be considered the author or bearer of mission.”⁸³ In other words, no one expression of the church contains the whole of God’s mission. Second, he expresses the need for churches to work together for the sake of that mission. “The church is, really, a family of local churches in which each should be open to the needs of the others and to sharing its spiritual and material goods with them. It is through the mutual ministry of mission that the church is realized, in communion with and as local concretization of the church universal.”⁸⁴ We are only a part of the church universal as we work together with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

With the above agreement between Emergents, Presbyterians and Bosch, there is much to be celebrated. However, when it comes to the generous orthodoxy of the ECM, Presbyterians are cautious. This likely has to do with our history regarding Church Union when one third of the Presbyterian Church in Canada decided to forgo union with other denominations.

The higher motivations for refusing to join the Union were based on the traditional Presbyterian concern for strong and clear expressions of the historic faith. Opponents rejected the idea that getting together on any basis was more

⁸² Donald K. McKim, *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2011), 4.

⁸³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 392.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

important than truth. [...] Presbyterian concern for the intellectual content of the faith expressed in creeds and confessions took precedence over these things.⁸⁵

If Presbyterian history is any indication, it seems that Presbyterians are not likely to dilute the confessional stance of the denomination to accommodate Presbytermergent beliefs.

Those who are ordained into the PCC, both elders and ministers, are required to accept the subordinate standards of the denomination. These include *Westminster Confession of Faith*, *Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation* and *Living Faith*. Furthermore, Presbyterians along with most Christians also affirm the ancient creeds of the church like the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. These documents lay out a particular theology which ministers are to teach and by which members are to live. Is there any room for a generous orthodoxy in these documents or in how they are used?

The Committee on Church Doctrine in their report "Confessing the Faith Today" wrote:

We recognize that any subordinate standard is both a living document - as it is read and interpreted in changing circumstances - and that it is also an historic text which points to the faith of church at a particular moment in time.⁸⁶

For example, a document like the *Westminster Confession of Faith* with its anti-Catholic rhetoric must be re-interpreted in our own context where Catholics are seen as fellow Christians. Not only are our Presbyterian confessions contextual, *Living Faith* sees the Bible in a similar light. "The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context."⁸⁷ Again, Bosch is in agreement: "Our entire context comes into play when we interpret a biblical text. One therefore has to concede that *all* theology [...] is, by its very nature, contextual." But instead of editing the *Westminster Confession of*

⁸⁵ John Congram, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 70.

⁸⁶ Committee on Church Doctrine, "Confessing the Faith Today: The nature and function of subordinate standards," in *Acts and Proceedings*, (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2003), 258.

⁸⁷ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984), 5.4.

Faith, the PCC has decided not to change any of the historic confessions. “Leaving the statements unchanged reminds us of our fallibility as human beings and cause us to recognize that even doctrinal statements which we make today are also historically and culturally bound and will need to be seen through different lenses in the future.”⁸⁸ It is statements like these that suggest Presbyterians are more generous in their orthodoxy than we might think.

One section in *Living Faith* that I suggest epitomizes a more generous orthodoxy is the section on ‘Doubt’.

Questioning may be a sign of growth. It may also be disobedience: we must be honest with ourselves. Since we are to love God with our minds, as well as our hearts, the working through of doubt is part of our growth in faith. The church includes many who struggle with doubt. Jesus accepted the man who prayed: “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”⁸⁹

This suggests that Presbyterians welcome those who doubt the veracity of *Living Faith*, *Westminster Confession of Faith* or even the ancient creeds. Doubt is the feeling that something is not right and it is the first step toward change. By affirming people’s doubts, *Living Faith* supports dialogue about our truth-claims. This is in line with *Living Faith*’s statement about the Spirit: “The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. We pray as a church to be guided into truth knowing that such truth may disturb and judge us.” It is from this belief about the Spirit that those ordained in the PCC can claim to accept the subordinate standards “under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.”⁹⁰ This statement allows room for the Spirit to continually guide us which necessitates a kind of humility that is critical to a generous orthodoxy.

⁸⁸ Committee on Church Doctrine, “Confessing the Faith Today: The nature and function of subordinate standards,” in *Acts and Proceedings*, (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2003), 258.

⁸⁹ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984), 6.2.2.

⁹⁰ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *The Book of Forms* (2012), 447.2.

But what about the ancient creeds which the overwhelming majority of Christians affirm? Is not the Apostles' Creed the bare minimum that someone must believe to be a Christian? Contextual or not, there is little wiggle room on the creeds for most Christians. The creeds, however, are not under debate within the ECM. Most Emergents will use them as a basic statement of belief. This is similar to Presbyterians in that members of the PCC are only asked to affirm the creeds and not the subordinate standards. However, there is a difference in how Emergents understand the creeds. Bass explains:

The experiential nature of the creeds can be seen in the Apostles' Creed (ca. 390), which begins with the words *Credo in Deum patrem*, translated into English as "I believe in God the Father." For those who read this through the modern lens of "belief," it seems as if this is an idea *about* God to which one must assent in order to join a Christian group – a question to answer correctly for entrance into heaven. But, if we grasp that the ancient sense of "believe" means "trust" or "devotion," the creed might be better translated thus: *I trust in God the Father...*⁹¹

This understanding has transformed "factual certainty" into "humility, hope and a bit of faithful supplication."⁹²

The conclusion from the above examination is that Presbyterian beliefs in contextuality, humility and the guidance of the Spirit, and the ecumenical creeds can foster a more generous orthodoxy which Presbytermergents value. What is most important here is not the content of the documents but the acknowledgement that they are all imperfect representations of our beliefs and that we should always be engaged in a process of dialogue regarding truth.

Humble Beggers

When it comes to interfaith dialogue, Emergents and Bosch are on the same page. McLaren uses Bosch extensively in his section on interfaith dialogue. But what do Presbyterians believe and what is at stake? Critics of the ECM accuse Emergents of universalism when it

⁹¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 131-132.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 132.

comes to their relationship with other faiths. In other words, salvation is not limited to faith in Jesus Christ. I would suggest that at the root of any discussion around interfaith dialogue is a question about salvation.

Living Faith states: “Salvation comes from God’s grace alone received through faith in Christ.”⁹³ Furthermore, “To say ‘no’ to Christ is to refuse life and to embrace death.”⁹⁴ These are not universalists’ types of statements. It is clear for Presbyterians that Christ is the only way to salvation. Yet Emergents and Bosch can make the same claim. McLaren quotes Bosch who is quoting the World Council of Churches which affirms “We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ.”⁹⁵ However, there is a ‘but’. Bosch goes on to say “at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.”⁹⁶ The belief in God’s sovereignty moderates our exclusivist notions of salvations and this is a very Presbyterian idea. McKim writes: “Presbyterians should always maintain that who is saved is decided solely by God. This is basic theology: God is free. God is free to give salvation to whomever God chooses. We believe this about election and predestination. We are saved only and solely by God’s gracious choosing.”⁹⁷

There is a tension here between our belief in salvation through Jesus Christ and our belief in the sovereignty of God. Universalists emphasize God’s sovereignty while exclusivists emphasize Jesus as the only way. But as Bosch concludes, there needs to be another way. He writes:

I would like to posit my belief that we are in need of a theology of religions characterized by creative tension, which reaches beyond the sterile alternative between a comfortable claim to absoluteness and arbitrary pluralism. [...] The

⁹³ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984), 3.6.1.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 10.3.

⁹⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 489.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Donald K. McKim, *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), 58.

various models [exclusivism and universalism] seem to leave no room for embracing the abiding paradox of asserting both ultimate commitment to one's own religion and genuine openness to another's.⁹⁸

This is why Bosch affirms that “we appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it.”⁹⁹

For in process of holding these paradoxical beliefs in tension, humility is discovered and it is humility which is the basis for interfaith dialogue. And it is humility which *Living Faith* requests in our dealings with other religions.

Some whom we encounter belong to other religions and already have a faith. Their lives often give evidence of devotion and reverence for life. We recognize that truth and goodness in them are the work of God's Spirit, the author of all truth. We should not address others in a spirit of arrogance implying that we are better than they. But rather, in a spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to life in Christ.¹⁰⁰

Some would suggest that humility and dialogue undermines our beliefs and our call to be witnesses to the gospel. However, Bosch disagrees: “We affirm that witness does not preclude dialogue but invites it, and that dialogue does not preclude witness but extends and deepens it.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, if we truly believe that “we are compelled to share this good news,”¹⁰² then interfaith dialogue is absolutely necessary and it must be done by paradoxically “witnessing to our deepest convictions, whilst listening to those of our neighbors.”¹⁰³

⁹⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 483.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 489.

¹⁰⁰ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984), 9.2.1.

¹⁰¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 487.

¹⁰² The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984), 9.2.2.

¹⁰³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 484.

Marriage and Membership

Membership in the PCC is accompanied by an affirmation of faith. Even though this affirmation includes “only those beliefs held in common by all Christian churches,”¹⁰⁴ it still places a priority on believing before belonging contrary to the ECM. To explore this tension between the prioritizing of believing versus belonging, I will look at how the PCC views membership.

Historically, membership in the Presbyterian tradition was tied to communion. One had to be a member in good standing to be admitted to the table. However, “the journey towards a table that is open to all, including children, makes this explanation for membership increasingly anachronistic.”¹⁰⁵ Since membership has essentially lost its meaning in connection with communion, what does membership mean? The Book of Forms describes the meaning of membership as follows:

It is the duty of members to give faithful attendance on gospel ordinances; to give their ministers and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries all dutiful respect, encouragement and obedience in the Lord; to submit to the session as over them in the Lord; to cherish a caring spirit among themselves; and to promote the peace and prosperity of the congregation. It is also their duty to take a lively interest in all that concerns the welfare of the whole church; to contribute heartily, as the Lord shall enable them for the maintenance of the Christian ministry, and the furtherance of the gospel at home and abroad; and to manifest a Christian spirit in all the relationships of life.¹⁰⁶

This suggests that membership in the PCC is more than just professing what one believes, it is about commitment. First, it involves submitting to the authority of the minister and session. Second, it is a commitment to the whole church and the furtherance of the gospel. Third, it is commitment to discipleship. Will Ingram and Matthew Ruttan, in their article entitled “So What

¹⁰⁴ John Congram, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 43.

¹⁰⁵ Will Ingram and Matthew Ruttan, “So What Does it Mean to Become a Member of the Church,” *Presbyterian Record* (March 2011): 33.

¹⁰⁶ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *The Book of Forms* (2012), 141.

Does it Mean to Become a Member of the Church?”, suggest we think of membership in this way: “[Membership] means that we are publicly affirming our baptismal identity as people who belong to the body of Christ; it means that we are dedicating our lives to becoming partners in the ministry of a community of faith; it means that we are embracing the gift of community as a resource for deepening our calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁷ Again, this description of membership says less about belief and more about commitment. Furthermore, membership is not prior to belonging nor is commitment, but instead, symbolic of our already belonging and our commitment to the body of Christ.

Marriage is a common metaphor used for membership and even though Ingram and Ruttan suggest that the wedding metaphor is unhelpful,¹⁰⁸ I would disagree. They would rather use the metaphor of family to describe membership. However, no one decides to be part of a family, you are automatically included by genetics. Furthermore, while there may be obligations to your family, these are imposed by society and some family members may only take them up grudgingly if at all. Marriage, however, presupposes a freely-made decision and a self-imposed commitment to another. If we take marriage as our metaphor for membership, then the ECM approach to belonging can be seen in the light of co-habitation. However, this can be problematic because there is no agreed upon commitment to one another. This can breed a ‘church shopping’ mentality where once a community no longer satisfies one’s needs, that person simply moves on. It is surprising that the ECM would opt for a model of belonging that naturally encourages this kind of consumeristic approach to church. Membership is about a covenant relationship as opposed to a consumer relationship. It means binding ourselves to a community as we are bound to God. It means agreeing to stick it out for better or for worse.

¹⁰⁷ Will Ingram and Matthew Ruttan, “So What Does it Mean to Become a Member of the Church,” *Presbyterian Record* (March 2011): 35.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

Retaining the structures of membership in the church is not completely inconsistent with Emergent beliefs. For example, dialogue is an important value of the ECM. Yet Bosch states: “true dialogue presupposes *commitment*.”¹⁰⁹ He is not just talking about commitment to our beliefs but also commitment to our neighbour. Dialogue, he says, “without the authentic presence of the neighbor [...] becomes arrogant and worthless.”¹¹⁰ Membership engenders the kind of commitment needed to engage in real dialogue. Without it, people find it much easier to avoid this kind of dialogue because they are much less invested.

The ECM also values community but the type of community they desire takes commitment. Anyone who is committed enough to live “highly communal lives”¹¹¹ alongside their fellow Christians is, by the Presbyterian definition, a ‘member’ of that community. Whether this is recognized in a formal and symbolic way is less important than the commitment itself. Furthermore, what is community without accountability? One Presbytermergent I interviewed said that he was first attracted to the Presbyterian tradition because there was accountability built into the structures.¹¹² Not only are ministers held accountable but through membership, each member is accountable to the community through the session.

I would argue that Bass’ definition of ‘belonging’ is not far off from our marriage analogy. She writes: “Vital faith begins with desire and disposition, not a doctrine test.”¹¹³ In other words, faith begins with a desire to know God better and a commitment to following that desire. Marriage, like membership, is not a doctrine test either. Whether two persons believe the

¹⁰⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 484.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 45.

¹¹² Interview with Dylan Rooke, September 18, 2012. (Phone interview regarding Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community.)

¹¹³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 206.

same things does not exclude them from being able to love and support each other. Nor does marriage mean that our beliefs are fixed forever. They will change and grow as the relationship changes and grows. Of course, some common beliefs can be a helpful starting point. This accounts for asking members to affirm only the basic of Christian beliefs prior to membership. However, this is not the hinge on which membership swings. Membership is about commitment, a commitment to belonging.

Even if Emergents can affirm membership in the above way, there is still one problem left unresolved. Membership can create an ‘us and them’ mentality. This brings up an important question of the relationship between the church and the world. It is possible that in the ECM’s desire to tear down the barriers that separate the church from the world that they have lost what makes the church distinct. This would be regrettable for, according to Bosch, “the church has to remain identifiably different from the world, else it will cease to be able to minister to it.”¹¹⁴ The challenge is in how to be an open and welcoming community while setting boundaries.

This challenge is complicated by our current model of church. Guder describes this model as three concentric circles; in the middle there are the committed members of the congregation; the next circle includes those who are affiliated with the congregation but lack investment; and, the outermost circle is the unchurched culture surrounding the congregation. The goal in this model is to move people from the outside into the inner circles. However, this is often approached on an individualistic and consumeristic basis as the inner circle tries to meet the needs of the outer circles.¹¹⁵ Hospitality is then seen as a tool for bringing people in and not as a virtue. Guder classifies this model as a bounded-set organization which “defines

¹¹⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 388.

¹¹⁵ Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 202-203.

membership and identity at the entrance points or boundaries.”¹¹⁶ This is characteristic of the current Presbyterian model. Another way would be a centered-set organization which contrastingly “invites people to enter on a journey toward a set of values and commitments.”¹¹⁷ This is characteristic of the ECM’s model. Guder offers another model which is comprised of both centred and bounded set groups.

The missional community must be both centered and bounded. [...] The centered-set congregation invites people onto a journey with Jesus in order to understand its contours, to hear its stories, to sort out the issues and questions of commitment and discipleship. While the direction of the journey is the reign of God, the community is where people can discover and encounter the meaning of this larger journey. This journey, as a pilgrim people, calls for commitments to practices of the reign of God that can be made only in covenant. Such practices need to be encountered and demonstrated so that people might see the implications of the journey. The covenant community is a bounded set composed of those who have chosen to take on the commitment, practices, and disciplines that make them a distinct, missionary community.¹¹⁸

Guder provides a model that both acknowledges the importance of welcoming people wherever they are on their faith journey while also realizing the importance of commitment. In fitting with Bosch’s understanding of the church, this model holds in creative tension the church “in the world but not of the world.” Furthermore, this model provides a common ground for Presbyterians and Emergents to stand on regarding the issue of belonging and believing.

The Whole People of God

As a reformed theological idea, the priesthood of all believers is something Presbyterians uphold. McKim writes: “All members of the covenant community in the church as the people of God have [...] ministries to carry out [...]. We all share in the corporate ‘priesthood of all

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 206.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 206.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 207-208.

believers.”¹¹⁹ And Living Faith states: “All Christians are called to participate in the ministry of Christ. As his body on earth we all have gifts to use in the church and in the world.”¹²⁰ At first glance there appears to be no tension on the issue of lay leadership between the ECM and the Presbyterian tradition. This is not the case. In fact, there is much tension around the issue of ordination.

Christopher Rodkey, a “Methomergent”, writes: “The greatest weapon that the mainstream evangelical and ‘mainline’ liberal churches have used against any semblance of genuine or radical theology sweeping into their leadership is the pseudosacramental scandal of ordination.”¹²¹ Despite this scathing assertion, there is no sense from either Emergents or Presbymergents that ordination, as an idea, is completely bankrupt. At the same time, most critiques are calling for reform. For example, Jones commented in our interview that the rules around ordination are completely arbitrary. He shared a story of a woman whom he and other Christian journalists ordained to her blogging ministry. The argument made was that this group was just as arbitrary as any ordination based on geographical location.¹²² So while Jones has a radically different view of ordination, ordination, *per se*, is not the problem. Instead it is how ordination has been structured in the institutional church which has led to two related problems: the undermining of innovation and the disenfranchisement of the laity.

The first critique made by Jones is that ordination mitigates against any creativity. This view of ordination suggests that it “operates, on a practical level within mainline churches, as a

¹¹⁹ Donald K. McKim, *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), 67.

¹²⁰ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984), 7.2.1.

¹²¹ Christopher D. Rodkey, “Satanism in the Suburbs: Ordination as Insubordination,” in *The Hyphenateds: How Emergence Christianity is Re-traditioning Mainline Practices*, ed. Phil Snider (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2011), 47.

¹²² Interview with Tony Jones, September 18, 2012. (Phone interview regarding his critique of denominationalism.)

mechanism to promote control.”¹²³ This is because the institution sees innovation or creativity as threatening to the established order. Jones writes: “Bureaucratic systems are, by their very nature, incapable of adjusting themselves to make room for innovative ecclesial experiments like those emerging in the ECM. Denominations [...] may attempt to co-opt those innovative congregations in their midst, forcing them to live by already established rules.”¹²⁴ He likens innovation in an institution to a virus which the institution tries to expel. Ordination, at its worst, supports the institution by restricting entrance to the structures which could advocate for the change need for renewal. As a result, institutions are their own worst enemies.¹²⁵ For Presbytermergents, this highlights the importance of this issue because it threatens to undermine their creativity in ministry.

Second, Jones argues ordination disenfranchises the laity. While the above issue has been, by and large, not recognized in the PCC, many ministers struggle with encouraging lay persons in ministry. Congram has identified this issue: “Presbyterian congregations will sometimes slide into the rut of letting the clergy do it all and fail to call upon the creative gifts in their church families.”¹²⁶ This is a critical issue in the denomination. Jones suggests that despite the recent attempts by denominations to increase the ministry of the laity, success is unlikely because they have “left the two-class system of clergy and laity intact.”¹²⁷

Congram lists many ways in which lay participation is affirmed: through a common hymn book for congregational singing, by the processing of the Bible by a lay person, in the prayer of illumination and through liturgy (literally the work of the people) which promotes

¹²³ Christopher D. Rodkey, “Satanism in the Suburbs: Ordination as Insubordination,” in *The Hyphenateds: How Emergence Christianity is Re-traditioning Mainline Practices*, ed. Phil Snider (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2011), 55.

¹²⁴ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 168.

¹²⁵ Interview with Tony Jones, September 18, 2012. (Phone interview regarding his critique of denominationalism.)

¹²⁶ John Congram, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 140.

¹²⁷ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 119.

congregational participation.¹²⁸ Despite this, he writes: “Still, one might wonder whether [the] plea for greater participation by the laity in worship has been adequately met [...] in present worship practice.”¹²⁹

Theoretically, the same cannot be said about Presbyterian polity. Sessions are comprised of lay elders and Presbyteries, Synods and General Assembly have a one to one ratio of ministers to elders. Elders can also be moderators at the highest level of the courts. In principle, as Congram affirms, “Ruling elders lie at the heart of the Presbyterian system.”¹³⁰ However, in practice, Presbytery becomes a clergy-dominated court. Clergy will speak more during a meeting, they are more likely to make motions and are more likely to convene committees. On one level, this has to do with the reality that ministers are ‘paid employees’ and the work of Presbytery is one of their duties. Clergy are also generally more familiar with the polity and procedures of the church and the issues at hand. Furthermore, they most likely will have more years of experience in meetings as they are voting members of Presbytery until they retire as opposed to elders who are limited by their term as representative elder. There is also an acquiescing on the part of the elders. Deserved or not, ministers are held in high respect by the eldership and with this respect also comes deference. When framed this way, even with a ratio of one elder to one minister, Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly are dominated by the clergy. So, while we might be unsatisfied with the current state of lay participation in worship and in our polity, the question remains whether we are willing to change the overarching structure that perpetuates it?

Before suggesting any reforms, the understanding of ordination in the PCC must be analyzed. Living Faith states:

¹²⁸ John Congram, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 87-97.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 140.

Through the church God orders this ministry by calling some to special tasks in the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are set apart to preach the Gospel, celebrate Baptism and Holy Communion and exercise pastoral care in Christ's name. Their ministry is an order which continues the work of the apostles. Christ preserves this order today by calling to it both men and women. The church recognizes this calling in the act of ordination.¹³¹

Some of the other 'special tasks' include eldership, diaconal service, mission work, chaplaincy and more. Therefore, ordination in the PCC includes more than just clergy. However, up until recently (2012), only Ministers of Word and Sacrament were allowed to celebrate the sacraments. This is not because they 'know' how the sacraments 'work'. Instead, it has more to do with what ordination represents. "If the ordained ministry is to provide a focus for the unity of the life and witness of the Church, it is appropriate that an ordained minister should be given this task. It is intimately related to the task of guiding the community."¹³²

Instead of seeing ordination as disenfranchising the laity, Presbyterians believe that in the act of ordination, all are reminded of their call to serve Christ.¹³³ The World Council of Churches (WCC) sees the ordained and lay as interrelated, not divided:

On the one hand, the community needs ordained ministers. [...] They serve to build up the community in Christ and to strengthen its witness. In them the Church seeks an example of holiness and loving concern. On the other hand, the ordained ministry has no existence apart from the community. Ordained ministers can fulfil their calling only in and for the community.¹³⁴

This is why the process of ordination is a communal process. Ministers are called out of the laity and never cease to be part of the laity. No one can decide on their own that they are going to be a minister. Instead, the community plays an integral role in affirming the call to ministry. Also,

¹³¹ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith : A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984), 7.2.2-7.2.3.

¹³² World Council of Churches, *Faith and Order, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1984), 20.

¹³³ Donald K. McKim, *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2011), 70.

¹³⁴ World Council of Churches, *Faith and Order, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1984), 19.

students are not ordained until there is a community that has called them. All along the process of ordination, the laity play an important role.

So how do we resolve or hold these contrasting ideas together? First, much like Emergents and Presbyterians, Bosch has no interest in doing away with ordination. He writes: “Clericalism is not overcome by rejecting an ordained ministry or by downplaying its significance and task. [...] ‘If there is no specialized concentration of what is important to everyone, in the long run the community suffers as a result’.”¹³⁵ Instead of rejecting ordained ministry, Bosch sees it as in need of fulfillment.¹³⁶

Reform of the structures around ordination is certainly possible. It begins first by acknowledging, as the WCC suggests, that our particular forms of ordained ministry cannot be attributed “directly to the will and institution of Jesus Christ.”¹³⁷ In other words, we should not presume that the way we have structured ordination is the only way. The PCC’s Committee on Church Doctrine affirmed this stating that in Reformed churches there is a tolerance “for more than one Reformed understanding of ordination.”¹³⁸ Second, we need to affirm the role of the laity in pastoral care, preaching and sacraments.¹³⁹ Furthermore, we need to understand that “ordained ministry fulfills these functions in a representative way, providing the focus for the unity of the life and witness of the community.”¹⁴⁰ From these affirmations, the door to reassessing the structures around ordination in a way that embodies the priesthood of all believers is opened. Bosch concludes his section on *Mission as Ministry by the Whole People of God* with these words: “The clergy are not prior to or independent of or over against the church;

¹³⁵ Ibid., 474.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 473.

¹³⁷ World Council of Churches, Faith and Order, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1984), 19.

¹³⁸ Committee on Church Doctrine and Life and Mission Agency, “The Meaning of Ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments,” in *Acts and Proceedings*, (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2008), 354.

¹³⁹ World Council of Churches, Faith and Order, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1984), 19.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

rather, with the rest of God's people, they are the church, sent into the world. In order to flesh out this vision, then, we need a more organic, less sacral ecclesiology of the whole people of God."¹⁴¹

It's a small Presbyterian world after all

As noted above, Presbytermergents have affirmed the value of community within the Presbyterian tradition. Community is not an option for any Christian. "There is no 'Lone Ranger Christianity' in which we try to live the Christian life all by ourselves."¹⁴² This value of community in Presbyterianism is not just focused on a local level but on a regional, national and ecumenical level as well. Yet, as also noted above, individualism is problematic within the denomination as well. Congram laments the fact that Christians have become more individualistic particularly in the 20th century.¹⁴³

Individualism is not some modern notion that has infiltrated Christianity. Bosch writes: "It is inaccurate to argue – as often happens – that individualism is simply an 'invention' of the West. Rather, the Christian gospel of necessity emphasizes personal responsibility and personal decision; therefore individualism in Western culture is primarily a fruit of the Christian mission."¹⁴⁴ In other words, the individual is still important and does not fade into anonymity in the Kingdom of God. However, what is problematic, he argues, are modern notions of individualism: "Modern individualism is, to a large extent, a perversion of the Christian faith's understanding of the centrality and responsibility of the individual. In the wake of the

¹⁴¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 474.

¹⁴² Donald K. McKim, *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2011), 60.

¹⁴³ John Congram, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 75.

¹⁴⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 416.

Enlightenment, and because of its teachings, individuals have become isolated from the community which gave them birth.”¹⁴⁵

Linked to this idea of individualism is institutionalism and it is another way Presbyterians can misunderstand community. John McKnight and Peter Block write about the link between individualism and institutionalism in their book *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. Part of their theory is that individualism is encouraged when institutions take the place of communities. They write:

[W]e know from our work in communities around the globe that strong communities are vital, productive, and important. And above all, they are necessary because of the inherent limits of all institutions. No matter how hard they try, our very best institutions cannot do many things that only we can do. And the things that only we can do as a family and a neighborhood are vital to a decent, good, satisfied life.¹⁴⁶

Here is an example of a way in which strong communities can provide for people’s needs in ways institutions cannot. If you asked a police officer what is the best way to protect your family they would not say “hire more police, pass better laws or buy a security system”. They would say “get to know your neighbours”. In the same way, the church institution is looked to by its members to provide for their needs. A brief example will help illustrate this.

Before the PCC (as institution) passed rules about maternity leave requirements and compensation, my mother (a PCC minister) had four children. The congregations she served became instrumental in caring for my siblings and me, providing child care, meals and other assistance while my mom continued to minister. This was only possible because of the strong community that already existed and it served in continuing to build up that same community. No matter what the institution legislates, it cannot provide this kind of care to mothers or the added

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 2.

benefits of a stronger community. Even though the institution can have the best intentions of protecting employees, it has the effect of undermining the role of the community.

When it comes to community, Bosch would have us remember “that the church is an event among people rather than an authority addressing them or an institution possessed of the elements of salvation, of doctrines, and offices.”¹⁴⁷ However, does this mean that we should dispense with the church as an institution altogether? Even Jones must admit that the ECM will unlikely be able to avoid institutionalization.¹⁴⁸ But does this have to be a negative thing? Charles Fensham would support “an ongoing struggle to retain the institutional structures of Christian communities in North America.”¹⁴⁹ This is because, like Neil Postman, Fensham sees institutions as “meaning-making symbols in culture.”¹⁵⁰ There is much that ails our institutions but the “appropriate response is not the dismantling of institutions but their renewal.”¹⁵¹ In an attempt to resolve this tension between the ECM’s critique of institutions and the Presbyterian desire for renewal and preservation of their institution, I would suggest that Presbyterians could play an important role.

Community is an important value to both Presbyterians and Emergents, despite the above-noted differences. However, that value is lived out in different ways. For example, ECM congregations are generally smaller. While Presbyterians bemoan the shrinking of our congregations, Emergents see smaller congregations as essential to a strong community. Also, Emergents live, work and play where they worship. Some rural Presbyterian congregations can likely claim this but for urban and suburban congregations, members will have multiple spheres

¹⁴⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 380.

¹⁴⁸ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 180.

¹⁴⁹ Charles Fensham, *Emerging from the Dark Age Ahead: The Future of the North American Church* (Ottawa: Novalis Press, 2008), 181.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 180.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 181.

of life that do not intersect. They work in one part of the city, shop in another and play in another. Rarely do they live within walking distance of the church building. I, for example, drive past five churches before I arrive at my own. Finally, ECM congregations have a stronger online community as well. Presbyterians, likely because of demographics, have not utilized technology to foster this kind of community.

These differences are all superficial and should not be a source of tension but they do speak to the intentionality of the ECM in embodying the value of community. However, there is one aspect of community which Emergents value which has been largely absent from the ECM: diversity. Bosch also upholds this value. He writes: “The apostle Paul sought to build communities in which, right from the start, Jew and Greek, slave and free, poor and rich, would worship together, learn to love one another, and learn to deal with difficulties arising out of their diverse social, cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds.”¹⁵² When compared to the overall demographics of Canada, the PCC is no model of multiculturalism. However, in relation to other denominations like the Christian Reformed Church, which includes only 1.4% visible minorities, the PCC is significantly more diverse with 7.25% visible minorities including Korean, Chinese, Ghanaian, Hungarian, Spanish, Arab and Caribbean congregations.¹⁵³ I also would suggest that due to the size of the PCC, as a denomination, it seems like more of a community. I often like to say “It is a small Presbyterian world after all.” Emergents would find both these features attractive.

¹⁵² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 466.

¹⁵³ Stuart Macdonald, “Presbyterian and Reformed Christians and Ethnicity,” in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, ed. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 174-175.

Presbyterian Poets

Bosch affirms the need for beauty stressed by the ECM. He writes: “People do not only need truth (theory) and justice (praxis); they also need beauty, the rich resources of symbol, piety, worship, love, awe, and mystery.”¹⁵⁴

Whether it is the influence of Calvin’s desire to restore the simplicity of worship or the influence of the Enlightenment and its cold calculated rationality, beauty is not something that is often associated with Presbyterians. There is something to be said for the beauty of simplicity but as Congram writes, “In their quest for simplicity, Presbyterians have not always recognized nor affirmed the artistic gifts of their people.”¹⁵⁵ He attributes this to how Presbyterians historically have sometimes viewed the arts (i.e., “a mixture of suspicion and hostility”).¹⁵⁶ This view is changing however. There was a time when Presbyterians would have balked at the idea of using candles in worship but now they are used for many a Christmas eve service. It is not that Presbyterians are against beauty; I think it is more a lack of experience in incorporating visual arts in worship.

However, beauty in worship should not be reduced to the visual because there is an area of the arts in which Presbyterians are quite experienced: poetry. The sermon has been given a privileged place in worship within the Presbyterian tradition. Congram writes: “You will seldom attend a Presbyterian service of worship without hearing a sermon and giving an offering.”¹⁵⁷ In the sermon there is a wonderful opportunity for expressing beauty and as Bosch suggests, a need. The need for poetic preaching has been identified by Walter Brueggemann in his book *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*.

¹⁵⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 431.

¹⁵⁵ John Congram, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 142.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 100.

The problem with the current state of preaching, according to Brueggemann is that the “prose-reductionism of the gospel has led our believing society to misappropriate the promise of the gospel.”¹⁵⁸ What he means by this is that our world has reduced the truth of the gospel to something that can be controlled, contained and categorized but the act of doing so has trivialized the gospel. The result of this is that the gospel no longer transforms our lives or worse, supports our ideologies. His solution suggests that preachers must become poets of the Word. Not poets in the sense of rhyme or rhythm, but poets who speak a word that “breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion and pace.”¹⁵⁹

It seems to me that Presbyterians, with the high value they place on theological education and the sermon, are in a unique position to reclaim this form of preaching as poetry and thus reclaim a sense of beauty in worship. However, beauty cannot be limited to the poetic. Congram suggests that “Color and art is [sic] an area Presbyterians need to explore and use more fully.”¹⁶⁰ Therefore, the theme of beauty within the ECM is a valuable addition to the Presbyterian tradition pushing for the incorporation of not only a multiplicity of artistic forms expressing the truth of God, but the utilization of the gifts of the whole people of God.

What the above analysis of the tensions between Presbyterians and the ECM has shown is that in many cases, Presbyterians and the ECM share many similar beliefs. How those beliefs get lived out may be different but there is much that they share in DNA. These include (1) an openness to theologically-diverse opinions, (2) a humility toward other faiths, (3) an emphasis on commitment instead of belief when it comes to belonging, (4) a prioritizing of the role of laity in leadership, (5) a desire for vibrant relationships in community and (6) an appreciation of beauty

¹⁵⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 141.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁰ John Congram, *This Presbyterian Church of Ours* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1995), 142.

in worship. This sharing of DNA does not negate the tensions that may arise around ordination, membership, doctrine or a host of other issues. However, this shared DNA is important. For Jones, Emergent is not a gimmick that you can apply to a congregation.¹⁶¹ It is a DNA from which certain patterns of ministry are created. Without the proper DNA, attempts to mimic ‘Emergent’ will fail. Since Presbyterians share similar DNA with Emergents, I believe a viable hybrid between them is possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to summarize where our investigation of the relationship between Presbyterians and Emergents has led. First, using the work of Brian McLaren and others, some specific beliefs and practices of the ECM have been considered. Critics of the ECM, particularly D.A. Carson, have also been considered. These beliefs and practices have been put into dialogue with the Presbyterian tradition and with missiologist David Bosch to discern where there are similarities and tensions. The resulting conclusion is that due to the similarities in DNA (i.e., core beliefs and practices), it is possible and even likely that someone might consider themselves both Presbyterian and Emergent or Presbymergent. Second, the issues within the PCC identified by Presbymergents like Michael Clawson relate directly to those areas in which tension is still present. Through further dialogue between Presbyterians and Emergents, it is possible to discern and implement productive and innovative ways forward. Third, the problem of decline in the PCC is of critical importance. Gordon Haynes has recently completed a report regarding the state of the PCC along with directions for the future. The report’s current projections suggest a decline of one third of the number of churches within the denomination and

¹⁶¹ Interview with Tony Jones, September 18, 2012. (Phone interview regarding his critique of denominationalism.)

a 40-50% reduction in giving to Presbyterians Sharing.¹⁶² Whether church decline is a result of cultural change as the ECM believes or as a result of a loss of costly faith like Kelley, Finke and Starke theorize, Presbymergent has been shown to be a valid response. Therefore, I propose that in the interest of moving forward as a denomination that the PCC take an open and welcoming posture toward the ECM and offer encouragement, support and partnership to those Emergents who have an affinity toward the Presbyterian tradition (i.e., Presbymergents).

Practically, this means adopting what Haynes calls “experimenting and entrepreneurial/adaptive behavior.”¹⁶³ He writes: “The emerging church arises from experimentation. As a church we are too often afraid of failure. We need to be willing to give permission to fail.”¹⁶⁴ Experimentation also takes money. Fortunately, as noted by Jones, mainline denominations have relatively abundant assets stored in investments and capital.¹⁶⁵ As more congregations close, more of these assets will become available. Instead of using it for the maintenance of the institution, it should be used for ‘research and development’ at the congregational and Presbytery level. Presbymergents and their innovative approach to ministry can help lead the way.

However, it should be noted that the call for experimentation is not new. The unfortunate reality is that despite good intentions, not enough has been done regarding this and other related recommendations. Apparently, Jones’ criticism of institutions is true in the case of the PCC. Are we then doomed as a denomination? Bass would suggest that if our idea of the denomination is equated to the institution, then yes, it may very well cease to exist. However, if we understand the denomination as a tradition, then no, the Presbyterian tradition will not die but survive as

¹⁶² Gordon Haynes, *Life and Mission Agency Research Project 2011-2012* (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2012), 17.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Tony Jones, September 18, 2012. (Phone interview regarding his critique of denominationalism.)

long as we keep telling the story of our tradition and continue to reshape it.¹⁶⁶ This is what I believe lies at the heart of Presbyterians, a desire to take the tradition and reshape it for an ever-changing world.

¹⁶⁶ Seminar on *Christianity After Religion* with Diana Bulter Bass, November 2-3, 2012. (Knox Presbyterian Church, Dundas ON.)

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