

Article

Emerging Churches in Post-Christian Canada

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Abstract: The traditional mainline and evangelical churches in Canada, as in most western countries, are either in decline or static. Taken as a measure of the future, the prospects for Christianity in Canada, and more broadly the West, are bleak. Post-Christian Canada, however, contains thriving alternative and innovative forms of church, often called ‘emerging’ churches. They take many forms of expression, but share common theological convictions. Based on site research and personal interviews, this article describes the various types and contexts of these churches in Canada. It then highlights three of their central theological characteristics. First, rejecting the ‘culture wars’ social involvement of Christendom churches, they embrace practices and initiatives that transform their local communities. Second, they embrace an incarnational and contextual understanding of Christian life and ministry. Eschewing mega-church franchise models, they endeavor to shape their ministry to their local communities. Third, they adopt a comprehensive rather than compartmental spirituality.

Keywords: emerging church; evangelicalism; secularization; Canadian Christianity

1. Introduction

Until just a few decades ago Canada was explicitly a Christian nation. Today it is one of the West’s most post-Christian nations. Though no longer falling off a cliff, the erosion of attendance and

involvement in mainline churches continues.¹ Attendance numbers at evangelical churches remain static, due in part to the assimilation of immigrant churches, without which these churches might be in decline too. The decline is particularly steep among young people. Recent polling carried out by Reginald Bibby demonstrates an acute contraction in the percentage of young Canadians who identify themselves with any faith. In 1984, 50% of teens identified themselves as Catholic, 35% as Protestant, 3% as belonging to other faiths, and 12% as having no faith at all. After two decades of steady deterioration, the 2008 numbers show 32% identified themselves as Catholic, 13% as Protestant, 16% as belonging to other faiths, and 32% as claiming no faith at all ([1], Table 9.11, p. 176). Bibby's comments on his findings in a Maclean's magazine interview are telling. He states, "For years I have been saying that, for all the problems of organized religion in Canada, God has continued to do well in the polls. . . . That's no longer the case" [4]. Moreover, Bibby reports that 47% of people born between the years 1989–1993 declare that they "never" attend religious services ([1], Table 9.8, p. 178).

The prognosis for Christianity in Canada appears grim. But that is not the whole story. During this period of decline, new and vital forms of church arose. Often called "emerging churches," they are fresh responses to the new cultural location of the Canadian churches and to what they perceive as the problematic remnants of the Christendom churches. We use the term "emerging" not in the sense of the "emergent church" movement, though clearly many of the churches we investigate began and/or still fit within that movement. But rather we use it to identify forms of the church that are new and alternatives to traditional forms of the church. Admittedly, the term is fluid and difficult to define precisely. Somewhat like the term "alternative" music; where does it end and begin? The types of churches that fit the alternative category include the house church movement, new monastic/intentional communities, and urban revitalization communities. Moreover, we focus on new forms of the church within evangelical Protestantism.

This article derives from a collaborative research project, "Alternative Churches: New Expressions in the Canadian Church," funded by a 2011–2012 Lilly Collaborative Theological Research Grant. The researchers teach at a Canadian seminary, McMaster Divinity College. One teaches in Theological Studies and the other in Ministry Studies. We teamed together for this project because we believe our distinct areas bring important interdisciplinary perspectives to the project. The primary source of data for identifying the theological themes and motivations at the heart of these churches is direct participation and interaction with emerging churches and their leaders and congregants. The project uses the analytic-inductive sociological method of grounded theory, wherein theoretical propositions and conceptual formulations are developed, informed, assessed, and adjusted by making direct comparisons of the data obtained (*i.e.*, interviews, observations, and participant-observation) from the sites of inquiry [5]. The adaptive nature and interest in the role that meaning making has in human behavior and associations makes grounded theory suitable for this project. The objective is to develop an account of emergent expressions of Christianity based on direct data and not on text based expert theories and/or *a priori* academic interpretations. Our use of grounded theory focuses primarily on issues of theology and practice. Our primary data derives from interviews with, and observations of, leaders and practitioners during site visits to emerging churches. These visits also provide us an

¹ For the decline of Christianity in North America, and the larger context of the story of emerging Christians and churches in Canada, see [1–3].

opportunity to immerse ourselves as much as possible in the everyday life of these churches so that we are able to gain an intersubjective understanding and appreciation of the social meanings and experiences of our participants.

The present discussion has three goals. The first is to outline the types of emerging Christians and churches in Canada. The second is to situate the emerging Christians in the larger context of religious trends in Canada. The third is to detail three of the key theological characteristics of these churches. They include the following. First, rejecting the ‘culture wars’ social involvement of Christendom churches, emerging churches embrace practices and initiatives that transform their local communities. Second, they embrace an incarnational and contextual understanding of Christian life and ministry. They reject the mega-church franchise models and endeavor to shape their ministry to the their local communities. Third, they adopt a comprehensive rather than compartmental spirituality. But first we describe who the emerging Christians are and the nature of their churches.

2. Who and What are the Emerging Christians and Churches?

2.1. Who are the Emerging Christians?

Peter is a self-proclaimed communist Christian who feels more at home with crack addicts on the streets of Vancouver.² Paul is a hip early thirties guy with a cool goatee and tattoos. He left a successful youth ministry position in a mega church in Calgary to start a small business incubator-community center-church in the Great Lakes Rust Belt town of Sarnia. Mary is a seminary student from an upper middle class professional family. She lives in an intentional community in the post-industrial wasteland of east Hamilton. What do a young political radical with dreadlocks, a middle-aged former business executive, and a graduate student share in common? Quite a lot, as it turns out. They represent the new and emerging face of Christianity in post-Christian Canada. They are a counter narrative to the popular story that Christianity is both in decline and of little consequence for people’s lives. These emerging Christians have a healthy faith and active participation in the church. Our project focuses on these Christians who remain engaged in their faith and the church. Though they share a common commitment to the Christian faith, they are not monolithic. The emerging Christians represent a rich diversity of backgrounds, interests, social lifestyles, and age groups.

Peter, Paul, and Mary represent the three demographic categories of emerging Christians: Bohemians, Metros, and Misfits. First, the Bohemians are artistic people. They wear alternative clothing. Join co-op farms to grow their own fruits and vegetables. They eat local and organic. They tend to be politically progressive or liberal. They are back to the earth and eco-conscious. Second, the Metros, also known as Hipsters, range from young mid twenties to mid-thirtyish. They sport trendy haircuts and clothes—e.g., wear skinny jeans. They use an array of electronic gizmos (preferably Apple products). They are probably in or have university education. Graduate education is common among them. They are in or on their way to professional careers. Third, the Misfits are people from a variety of backgrounds. They include a range of people from the younger demographic who do not fit the cool hipster crowd to middle aged and retired folks. What they share in common is a sense that

² All names are pseudonyms. Where people are identifiable by role and church location, participant granted permission for identification.

they are *mis-fits* in the traditional evangelical churches. They do not fit the evangelical status quo. They regard middle and upper middle class suburban Christianity as not merely banal, but misguided. It converts Christianity into a consumer religious therapy. The pastor of the Crossings in Acton, Ontario is a case in point. He was a successful international business executive who retired mid-career to follow a call to Christian ministry. He spent several years on staff at a large evangelical church in Calgary. Dissatisfied with the nature of suburban evangelical church ministry he left the position and moved to Acton in order to be closer to family. There, along with a small group of Christians, he started a small coffee shop and community center church in a sleepy suburb on the outer limits of the Greater Toronto Area.

We include people with mental and physical disabilities in the Misfits category as well. A striking feature of the emerging churches is not only the presence of people with disabilities, but also their visibility. Most evangelical churches warmly receive people with physical and mental disabilities. They are not, however, usually central to the public activities of the churches. Not so with the emerging churches. At The Story, the pastor began a discussion with the congregation about his message. A member of the congregation with an obvious mental disability asked a question and began a dialogue with the pastor. No one fidgeted uneasily or gave nervous glances. It was clear that his inclusion and involvement in the public life of the church was a normal experience for this community. In short, although significant numbers of the new Christians are hip emerging adults, grey haired retired folks and pedestrian middle-aged people also comprise the demographic profile of the emerging Christians.

2.2. *What are the Emerging Churches?*

Like the mix that comprises the emerging Christians, the emerging churches have numerous forms. Matthew 25 House is an intentional community in East Hamilton. The Crossings is a coffee shop-community center-affordable housing for people on public assistance-church in the small downtown area of Acton. Eucharist is a congregation of young professionals colonizing a dilapidated neighborhood in downtown Hamilton and a United Church—a former flagship of Canadian Christendom. The Story inhabits two storefronts in the old city center of Sarnia, Ontario. Though these new forms of the church are diverse, they reveal common genres and patterns of practice. They include intentional communities, colonizing churches, social enterprise churches, and third space churches. The new types of church cannot be easily and simply defined. No one form, model, or set of practices captures the variety of the emerging forms of church life in Canada. Certain patterns, however, can be identified.

First, intentional communities or new monastic communities are an important form of the church for emerging Christians. Matthew 25 House is an intentional community in East Hamilton. A group of seminary students and university students, with the financial support of a couple from the Maritimes, started Matthew 25 House. The group consists of single young adults and a married couple. They live according to a covenant of community life. They pool and share resources. Their vision of community life also includes serving and connecting with their neighbors, such as organizing activity days for children in the neighborhood. One challenge they have experienced with building relationships with people in their community is the reality that the members of Matthew 25 House live in the lower class

community of East Hamilton by choice. They have the social mobility to leave for more comfortable environs at will. The neighborhood people do not share this luxury. Crossing this cultural difference has proven difficult. They recognize the implicit paternalism of their project and have not discovered an effective way to cross this distance.

Second, colonizing churches enter once thriving middle class communities and Christendom churches. Eucharist in East Hamilton represents this form of emerging church. Eucharist is a congregation of young professionals colonizing a dilapidated neighborhood in downtown Hamilton. The church meets in a United Church. Central to the vision of Eucharist is living and working in the neighborhood of the church. Suburban evangelical churches are often commuter churches. Parishioners travel from various middle and upper middle class suburbs to attend the church. In contrast, the members of Eucharist believe that being a part of the local community is essential. Many of the members have relocated to the immediate area of the church. Several have started small businesses in the community. By doing so, they participate in the revitalization of the neighborhood and build relationships with people in the community.

Third, social enterprise churches endeavor to enhance community life. The Story, an innovative church in Sarnia, Ontario exemplifies social enterprise churches. The Story inhabits two storefront spaces in the old downtown center. Based on the petro chemical industry, Sarnia boomed in the middle decades of the twentieth century, but has since then steadily declined. Like many former and dying industrial towns in the Great Lakes Rust Belt, Sarnia faces a shrinking population, poor air quality, and economic atrophy. The Story is part of the town's effort to revitalize its urban core.

Fourth, third space churches meet in non-church venues such as community centers, coffee shops, and youth centers. Their goal is to reach people who are unlikely to enter a traditional evangelical church. Café Church in Kingston (Ontario) is a third space church. Kingston is a professional and university town. The church meets in a coffee shop in the business district of Kingston. Their goal is to provide a church for unchurched professionals in the center of a university town.

3. Emerging Christians and Religious Trends in Canada

3.1. Emerging Christians and the Decline of Religion in Canada

The context of emerging Christians is the broader erosion of religious involvement in Canada over the past several decades (similar statistics also characterize religious trends in the United States). From the beginning of its European and English colonization through the 1960s, Canada was a Christendom culture.³ Decline of faith and religious activity is most significant among emerging adults (ages 18–29).⁴ Through most of the 1960s more than half of Canadians reported they had attended religious services in the past seven days ([2], Table 2.3, p. 28). Not so today. Nearly half of pre-boomers (born before 1946) report monthly attendance at a religious event. Less than one in five post-boomers (born after 1965) attend religious services on a monthly basis. But the downturn also affects older generations. Attendance figures among boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) show significant

³ For a concise and effective history of Canadian Christendom, see [6], pp. 6–11.

⁴ “Emerging,” applied here to the demographic of young adults in the age range of 18–29, is distinct from its application to “emerging” churches.

drop-offs. Where 45% of pre-boomers indicated monthly religious attendance, only 30% of boomers did so in 2000.⁵ Since the 1970s the percentage of people who never attend religious services doubled (from 20% to 40%). The overall decline of participation in Christian religious activities seemed to reach a bottom at just under one in three Canadians in the late 1990s ([7], Table 2, p. 835).⁶

The accelerating decline among the younger generations, however, may make optimism on the overall figures over the next decades seem Panglossian. Even bleaker is the statistic that only 13% of the post-boomer generation attends religious services on a weekly basis ([2], p. 31). As David E. Eagle points out, “Canada has transitioned from a country where less than one-fifth of the population would not set foot in the door of a church or other religious venue in a given year to one where this is the norm for almost half of the population. This change occurred over a mere 22 years . . . these changes signal major societal shifts” ([10], pp. 838–39).⁷ Yet, the outlook is not entirely gloomy. Statistics from 2010 show that while only 28% of Canadians attend religious services on a monthly basis, 65% say that spirituality and religious issues are important to their everyday life ([7], Table 2, p. 835). The story of emerging Christians in Canada connects with this larger story of Christianity in Canada. It shows that although many people (primarily emerging adults but also older generations) leave the traditional institutional church, they do not leave their Christian faith, but turn to alternative forms of Christianity and church experiences.

3.2. *Emerging Christians and the Decline of Evangelical Church Attendance*

Today evangelical church youth groups attract large numbers of teenagers, but after high school they leave the church. Young/emerging adults, also known as Millennials, flee the church in droves once they are out from under their parents’ tutelage. That is the conventional wisdom. It has two fallacies. First, absence from the traditional evangelical church is not absence from the Church. Church leaders often lament the missing twenty-somethings. The generational gap in the churches is obvious. Visit your typical middle class evangelical church and you will find thriving ministries for children, teenagers, middle-aged adults, and seniors. Between the ages of 18 and the early thirties young couples with no kids and some with young kids you will find a dead zone. Pastors and parents ponder, why are their youth forsaking The Church and turning away from The Faith?⁸ Some no doubt are. Others, however, have not turned their backs on The Church or The Faith. Yes, they have left the church and the faith of their upbringing. But they have not turned to atheism, some other religion or what

⁵ Statistics in this paragraph are from [1], table 9.1, p. 165.

⁶ Bibby’s interpretation of the decline and whether or not a renaissance of involvement with organized religion or polarization of religious and non-religious groups is underway has come under scrutiny. Significantly, however, the scholarly debate is one of degree and not kind. They all agree that religious participation among Canadians is in decline and the only categories that show any meaningful growth are non-attendance and no religious affiliation. See [7–11].

⁷ Eagle believes this transition reflects the process of secularization. He does not see secularization as the inevitable result of the rise of modern culture, but the undeniable historical phenomenon taking place in Canada.

⁸ For the decline of youth involvement with organized religion in Canada, see [1], pp. 164 and 178. For similar patterns in the United States, see [3], pp. 89 and 112.

Reginald Bibby calls, “the ambivalent middle” ([7], p. 837; [8], pp. 133–35; [10]⁹). Rather, they have gone to alternative forms of the church that are, at least for now, thriving.

Nevertheless, young people who check out of the church and retain an ambiguous faith or none at all receive most of the attention. Addressing the absence of emerging adults from evangelical churches in the United States, David Kinnaman places them into three categories. Nomads have no active church involvement, but have kept their faith in Christ and portray their religious identity as a spiritual journey. Prodigals have rejected the Christian faith of their upbringing. Exiles grew up in the Christian church, but now feel alienated from it and adrift in a no-man’s land between their faith and culture. Yet, they also retain a deep commitment to the Christian faith ([1], p. 25). Kinnaman focuses on the reasons young people drop out of the church. Our project and his are not in disagreement, but address different sides of religion among emerging adults ([12], pp. 26–27). Our focus is on those who leave the church of their upbringing (like Kinnaman’s Exiles), but have found their way out of the spiritual no-man’s land and engaged with organized communities of the Christian faith.

Bucking the cultural trend of disengagement from institutional religion, emerging Christians have a healthy faith and active participation in the church. The young emerging Christians are not Nomads, Prodigals, or Exiles, but Pilgrims and Pioneers. They are Pilgrims, because they are people of deep faith on a quest for a holy place. They are not on a trail to a sacred site, but to a Christian community. They seek a Christian community that recognizes, celebrates, and nurtures the diversity of human experiences and personalities. A Christian community that they believe nurtures an authentic Christian faith in contrast to what they perceive as the prosaic consumer and therapeutic Christianity of the traditional evangelical church. They are Pioneers because they leave the settlements of the traditional evangelical church on a trek into uncharted ecclesiastical lands.

The reigning groupthink has a second problem. It assumes the drain from the church extends only to young adults. The churches presume they have a lock on the older demographics. That, however, is not the case.¹⁰ In 1957 over half (54%) of Canadians attended religious services on weekly basis. By 1975 less one in three (32%) and by 2000 less than one in five (19%) did so ([2], Table 2.6, p. 32). Though emerging adults are the dominant demographic of the new churches, middle aged and older adults make up significant numbers of emerging Christians as well. Our research shows that some members of older generations that check out of the traditional evangelical church do not necessarily leave the church altogether. Like their younger counterparts, they turn to alternative forms of the church.

In sum, emerging Christians stand in continuity and discontinuity with the religious direction of Canadians. Like the broader cultural trend of disengagement from institutional religion, they check out of traditional religious activities. Bucking the trend, they remain engaged in organized religious activities. They do not fit the popular spiritual but not religious thesis. They leave traditional forms of the church, but have not left behind their faith and the church as such.

⁹ The ambivalent middle refers to people who are neither religiously active nor opposed to religious involvement. They are people interested in spirituality, but not necessarily church.

¹⁰ For the general erosion of attendance at religious events among all age groups, see [1], p. 465 and [2], p. 24. Indeed, between 1990 and 2000 drops among the three age groups of 35–44, 45–54, and 55–64 far outpaced the decline in the two younger groups of 15–24 and 25–34 (see [2], table 2.5, p. 31).

4. Emerging Churches and Traditional Evangelical Churches

Though emerging Christians are the focus of our research project, the traditional evangelical church requires attention in order to understand what emerging Christians abandon. Emerging Christians express dissatisfaction with the traditional evangelical churches. Most of the people we encountered, leadership and parishioners, have backgrounds in evangelical churches. For most of them that experience is negative. The perspectives on the evangelical church in this section are those of emerging Christians. Whether or not they are “accurate” is in many respects irrelevant. The salient fact is that they are the reasons many emerging Christians choose to leave the traditional expressions of the evangelical church and participate in alternative forms of church life. Moreover, their rejection of the traditional evangelical church is not a rejection of Evangelicalism per se, but only of the late twentieth century North American version of the tradition. Before we detail several of their motivations, we describe the nature of the evangelical church.

4.1. The “Traditional Evangelical Church”

Of course the evangelical church is not monolithic. In a significant sense, the evangelical churches carried out in terms of church practice what the mainline liberal theologians did with theology. Roger Olson defines liberal theology as “that approach to doctrinal reconstruction that gives maximal acknowledgement to the claims of modernity and rejects any absolute authority outside the self” ([13], p. 105). Evangelicals did the same thing only with ministry methods rather than doctrine. Retaining conservative doctrine, evangelical churches crafted ministries tailored to religious consumers that acknowledge little authority above the modernist measure of results.

Drafting a simple definition of the evangelical church is perhaps impossible, but key features nonetheless can be identified. Reference to the ‘traditional evangelical church’ throughout this essay includes churches with the following characteristics. (1) Predominantly white, suburban, and middle to upper-middle class. (2) The intentional application of a consumer methodology. Evangelical churches develop programs that meet the religious needs and wants of middle and upper middle class Christians. (3) Designing church programs and messaging to a target demographic. Most often the market audience is middle to upper middle class people. (4) A dependence upon attractional methods of evangelism as opposed to those that encourage the church to “go” into the world and engage people in their own contexts. (5) A focus on conversion and assimilation to church programs and activities. (6) An “us” *versus* “them” orientation to culture. A suspicious attitude toward church members who connect too deeply with people outside of the church and participate in ‘worldly’ matters like the arts or service organizations not affiliated with the church. (7) A patriarchal and hierarchical culture that often marginalizes those who do not conform to the accepted traditional standards of the established church. This ethos expects conformity to the conventional canons of church thought and life.

4.2. Flannel Graph Jesus

Emerging Christians are old enough to remember the flannel graph Jesus of Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. Flannel graph Jesus is white, tells just so moral stories that reinforce middle class morality and family values, and tucks little kids into bed with “now I lay me down to sleep,”

goodnight prayers. Perhaps flannel graph Jesus has his place in the children's Sunday School curriculum, but the emerging Christians sees the Jesus of the evangelical churches as simply an adult version of the same Jesus. Neither Jesus nor his religion matured, his flannel graph image just got bigger. Though matters of style, preference, and taste cannot be dismissed as motivations for the emerging Christians, they are not the primary catalyst for their flight from the evangelical churches.

They leave from a sense that much of what the evangelical churches do has little to do with God and the Gospel. Describing the sentiment of a network of emerging church leaders, one pastor declared, "the typical evangelical church experience just no longer made sense to us" [14]. The sentiment here is not that the church fails to be cool. Indeed, some evangelical churches are marvels of technological and professional production. No, the problem is that what happens in church does not correspond to what these emerging Christians perceive as God's work nor to what they understand as the teachings of Jesus. One pastor remarked that the evangelical church "just seemed totally disconnected from the rest of the way we lived" [14]. Moreover, the discontentment is not at the level of social group, lifestyle, or worship taste—e.g., he's a hip metro and disdains the bourgeois middle class churches, though that is the case for some. The problem is theological. The same pastor described a growing "gulf" between the way he was "seeing God at work in the homeless shelter and . . . what I was seeing in church on Sunday morning" [14]. As he continued his work with the homeless shelter the two experiences became irreconcilable. He chose to stay where he saw God at work and, consequently, left the evangelical church, and joined a fledgling emerging church in his community. Shortly afterwards, he received the call to pastor a new alternative church in a different community.

One leader of an intentional community believes that the church confuses "extras" with the Gospel [15]. For her, "extras" include fixation on idiosyncratic beliefs, social issues, and lifestyle choices. They do not include issues of Christian orthodoxy or behaviors that fall outside of biblical sanction. In other words, this sentiment does not reflect a form of Christian postmodern relativism that has jettisoned commitment to central Christian beliefs, morality, and mission. She continued that the church loses sight of Jesus, who is the core of the Gospel. The church forsakes the central message of the Gospel, which is God is love and works through Christ to bring peace between humans and God.

4.3. Programs not People

They believe the traditional church values programs not people. When asked about the traditional evangelical church, a member of an intentional community in Ontario shared the following exchange [15]. While talking with a student at a seminary in Ontario about her experience of living in an intentional community, the student asked, "how many people have you won to Christ through [your intentional community]?" This question left her exasperated. Not because she lacks interest in introducing people to Christ, but because, for her, it illustrates a fundamental problem with the evangelical church. Numbers, quantifiable ministry objectives, programs and not people are the focus of the traditional church. People become objectives; they are a religious market to attract and retain. Once attracted to the church, the church assimilates people into the machinery of the church. In contrast, this emerging Christian sees ministry as a process of meeting Jesus in other people, who may not "know" Jesus in the approved churchy way. Whether or not one agrees with her assessment of the evangelical church is beside the point. The pertinent fact is that her opinion represents the viewpoint of

many emerging Christians. Many of them are repelled by the thought of being reduced to a cog in the ministry machines of the traditional middle and upper middle class evangelical church. They refuse, moreover, to serve as the church's marketing and sales team with the goal of capturing more consumers for the church's religious product lines.

4.4. *Cookie Cutter Christianity*

Emerging Christians want open diversity in the church. "Open" is important. A mistaken assumption is that everyone in evangelical churches thinks and acts the same; they do not. The appearance, however, is otherwise. Emerging Christians cringe at what they see as the evangelical church's endeavor to instill doctrinal uniformity and encode homogenous individual and social morality and lifestyles. One pastor expressed frustration with the "cookie-cutter, big-box evangelical church" [14]. The problem is that standardization dehumanizes people. The result is a Christian Borg. This point does not reflect their desire for smells and bells in the worship experience, but a theological critique of the evangelical church. They believe that human beings are created in the image of God. Consequently, they believe people possess a rich array of talents, interests, personalities, and passions. Church should be a place that recognizes and celebrates human diversity. More often, according to emerging Christians, the evangelical church pounds out diversity for the sake of flattened uniformity. They find the flat world of the evangelical church a poor environment for the cultivation of authentic Christian life.

Emerging Christians also want varied worship expressions. People do not always live on the sunny side of life. Church experience should reflect the range of human experience and not assume that everyone, every Sunday, is a happy-clappy Christian. Worship can include a variety of experiences and even at times, the absolute bane of conventional evangelical churches, silence and unchoreographed moments. Worship music should also be diverse. Music can be dark, enigmatic, and, if possible, from a local musician. Worship services should not be afraid to explore the darker side of life, even using elements like lament and complaint as vehicles for personal and congregational expression. Most importantly, the worship experience should eschew all signs of professional production, though at the same time not be amateurish.

5. **Emerging Churches and Christendom Churches**

The emerging churches have a different orientation to culture than the Christendom churches. The Christendom churches had a dominant social role. They expected to, and often did, guide the moral mind of western culture. Canada does not have an official separation of Church and State, as does the United States. Nevertheless, Canada's political, educational, public social institutions promote secular identities. "De-Christianization," moreover, is not accidental. It is a century long and intentional effort by political, business, and social policy elites to modernize Canadian society on rational, liberal, and capitalist principles ([6], pp. 11–15). In this respect, post-Christendom is the result of secularization, which is the pervasive extension of state power to all arenas of life not explicitly religious—e.g., education and social welfare programs, many of which were once under the charge of the churches ([16], pp. 284–85). The lingering legacy, or perhaps the last gasps, of Christendom is the

‘culture wars.’ The culture wars are the church’s effort to retain and/or regain its role as the moral soul of society.

Absent from emerging churches is a desire to participate in the ‘culture wars.’ When asked about the church’s effort to take back the culture for God, a pastor of an alternative congregation in Ontario declared, “what a load of crap!” [14]. This comment, however, does not indicate indifference toward the culture and the world. It reveals a different response to the collapse of Christendom. Where some churches recognize the collapse of Christendom and run to defend the remaining ramparts of Christian cultural influence, emerging churches see Christendom as a lost cause. The emerging churches view of the Christendom project and adaptation to post-Christian Canada is pragmatic, theological, and local.

5.1. Pragmatic

The emerging church rejection of the Christendom project is a simple recognition that the Christian churches no longer occupy privileged places in Canadian culture. Efforts by the church to claw its way back into national public discourse are fruitless. In this sense, the response is pragmatic. It is a sensible adaptation to the reality of post-Christendom. The culture is no longer Christian, so churches should stop expecting to have the social voice and role they enjoyed during Christendom. In this respect, emerging Christians recognize the reality of secularization. Regardless of Canada’s historical association with Christianity, the nation, in terms of its national political and social identity, has rejected Christianity and adopted secularism. Consequently, churches should turn their attention to areas where they can make a difference. The emerging churches are not without an interest in social engagement. But the issues that motivate them differ from those that animate the culture wars. For example, they want to find ways to build relationships with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community rather than to boycott a corporation for its policies toward them.

5.2. Theological

The rejection of Christendom is also theological. Emerging Christians not only see efforts to shore up the crumbling walls of Christendom as pointless, but also problematic. Their vision of social engagement differs theologically from what energized, and still does in some cases, the Christendom churches. Christendom churches want to see their view of Christian morality implemented through political, judicial, and social policies. Emerging churches, however, want to bring justice, often understood in terms of the biblical concept of shalom, to people’s lives. They want the Gospel and God’s grace to transform people in personal relationships. They have no interest in mandating and imposing Christian morality through legal fiat. The church is about ministry on the margins and not social power. Indeed, they regard the collusion of the church with political power as a corruption of the church’s mission. Jesus met and touched the lives of people on the margins of society, not by issuing edicts from the corridors of the social power.

5.3. Local

For emerging churches, engagement with the “world” has a local orientation. Alternative churches want to bring tangible grace to the forgotten people on the “margins of empire.” The margins they

have in mind, however, are more often the post-industrial economic dead zones of cities like Hamilton and Sarnia than the slums of Calcutta. The Christendom churches sought and expected to have a place on the stage of national social discussions, through national publications, political and social organizations, and lobbyists. In contrast, the emerging Christians' social vision is more local than national. They are more likely to be found participating in local arts and cultural festivals, advocating for affordable housing, and serving food to the homeless. Protesting abortion and gay marriage and shoring up the national culture's Judeo-Christian values are not of interest to them. They want to know: are my neighbors hungry, do they have employment opportunities that provide livable wages; are our communities safe and sustainable; do our communities promote healthy environments and livelihoods, especially for the weakest and most vulnerable in our communities? Emerging Christianity represents a reorientation from Christendom's national agenda to Christianize the culture to bringing God's kingdom to local communities.

6. Incarnational and Contextual

“Incarnational” and “contextual” are buzzwords in contemporary theology and ministry studies, but what do they mean for emerging churches in Canada? Broadly, incarnational and contextual mean that these churches seek tangible ways to enact the grace of Christ in their world. They do not want to run church programs for Christian club members, but see the kingdom come to their communities. The Incarnation is not simply an article of faith. It provides a pattern for engaging the world. Beyond this broad notion, we can identify four facets of the incarnational and contextual nature of emerging churches.

6.1. 'This World' Churches

Emergent churches embrace a 'this world' vision of God's grace and kingdom.¹¹ They are churches for their communities. Their primary activities touch the lives of non-church people. Their activities are not religious per se. The Story preaches the gospel, but in ways that many evangelical churches would not recognize as such. Indeed, some evangelical churches would criticize them for a misplaced focus on the 'social gospel.' Most of the activities that take place in the church have nothing to do with common assumptions about church life. The space used for the Sunday gathering is part of the economic and cultural revitalization of downtown Sarnia. During the week the church office is an incubator space for a fledgling micro businesses. But why? What does the Gospel have to do with economic development plans? These activities are the result of The Story's vision of preaching the Gospel and enacting the kingdom of God. They are not primarily a platform to “preach” the Gospel. The business space they provide for local entrepreneurs is not a bait and switch approach to evangelism. Traditional evangelical churches often regard social justice ministries as meeting felt needs so that afterward the church can get to the real business of meeting spiritual needs. In other words, social justice ministries are not intrinsic to preaching the Gospel. They are a pretext that provides the captive audience for a presentation of the Gospel and the call to conversion. For The

¹¹ What we call 'this world' orientation among Canadian emerging Christians matches several of the characteristics of Kinnaman's Christian Exiles in the United States (see [12], pp. 77–78).

Story, providing venues for the arts community, local band concerts, and affordable office space is part of the vision of bringing social justice and the kingdom of God to Sarnia. These activities are an essential dimension of embodying God's grace in the world; they are not extraneous to it.

Their focus on community revitalization reveals a 'this world' vision of the kingdom of God. The peace and justice of God's kingdom is not only, or perhaps even primarily, for the sweet by and by. The Gospel is about new life, hope, and transformation for people in this world. Their vision for the transformation of life, moreover, encompasses all the dimensions of human life—e.g., social and economic—and not only its 'spiritual' aspect. Embodying the Gospel means to engage in activities that nurture these realities in the concrete circumstances of peoples' lives. The church, the local community of believers, should incarnate the abundant life of God's kingdom in and for people in this world.

Their 'this world' focus also indicates their rejection of the crypto-gnosticism that can characterize evangelical spirituality. Evangelical spirituality often has a heavenly and otherworldly orientation. After accepting Christ and receiving the forgiveness of sins, dutiful believers attend to the appropriate spiritual disciplines and church activities, but must ever keep in mind that heaven and not this world is their real home. In contrast, the emerging Christians see this world and the full range of life in this world as realms for the realization of God's kingdom. Rather than pining for heaven, they believe the church should be "a pilot project for the New Jerusalem" [17]. A member of The Story drew the distinctions in the following way. For the traditional church, the kingdom of God is heaven. At The Story, the kingdom is God's abundant life now [17]. One may wonder, is this a Canadian version of the Gospel of the North American Dream? No. The message of the church and the aspirations of its members are not a religious rationale and means for achieving the accoutrements of middle and upper middle class success. Rather, they want to facilitate places for others to flourish in the full range of their lives—music, arts, business, relationships, *etc.* The goal is not money, success, and a McMansion, but abundant life.

6.2. Embedded Churches

Emerging churches are embedded churches. Incarnational ministry is invariably contextual ministry. The churches craft their ministry to their context. They reject the franchise mega-church approach. Contextual ministry is not the application of standardized ministry models. In this sense, they are organic. They grow out of what is there. Church practices embody Christ's grace in ways that make sense in the local community. The ministries of The Story reflect the reality of Sarnia. In a community of economic stagnation, the church becomes a place that facilitates human flourishing in all its dimensions. The church is not content simply to increase church attendance and the numbers of people in church programs.

The Crossings in Acton, Ontario is an example of embedded ministry. They started with their community and developed a form of the church from its particular circumstances. The church started as five families began to meet as a home church. Their vision, however, was to become a visible and tangible avenue of grace in the community of Acton. They asked where do people get together in Acton? At the hockey arena and Tim Hortons. The idea of starting a coffee shop seemed reasonable to them. But where and how would they do it in a way that not only served coffee, but also contributed to the life of the community? The answer to that question came in the opportunity to purchase Manny's

Road House. Manny's was a notorious drinking establishment and place for drug and sex trafficking. The small group purchased Manny's and converted a bar into a coffee shop and a house of prostitution into affordable living space. Moreover, they remodeled the building to accommodate community activities and church gatherings. The Crossings is incarnational and contextual because it came to life as an ecclesial adaption to the local context.

6.3. *Sacrificial Churches*

Incarnational involves a sense of self-sacrifice. A pastor of a church in East Hamilton described being incarnational as acknowledging and giving up privilege. He remarked, "living in Hamilton is forsaking privilege" [18]. Why is living in Hamilton self-sacrificial and incarnational? Because the pastor and most of the congregation choose to live in East Hamilton. The people in the church are mostly young professionals. They grew up in middle and upper middle class suburbs or urban neighborhoods. They are in or have university degrees. Graduate degrees are common among them. They work in professional careers. Yet, they choose to live in a community of people who are drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, and dependent on public assistance. They believe that Jesus Christ provides the example. He gave up privilege and lived among the people on the fringes of society. Christians should do the same.

Suffering is not the goal of self-sacrifice. Quite to the contrary, emerging Christians testify to two benefits from their interactions with people on the margins of society. It provides the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with people and, in doing so, to encounter the presence the Jesus in them. "Living in an impoverished inner city environment brings you into contact with people that you would otherwise never meet and this actually brings you into contact with Jesus himself," remarked a participant in The Commons [19]. The Commons is an emerging church dedicated to the vision of living and identifying with the people in its neighborhood. The church meets in space provided by Living Rock Ministries, which is a center that provides programs for inner city youth in Hamilton, Ontario.

6.4. *Theological Churches*

These incarnational practices are theological because they follow the activity of God in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. They believe the Incarnation was a contextual event. God came to humanity in Christ. In Christ, God spoke human languages, ate local food, and experienced the travails and joys of the human condition. God became "Emmanuel," "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). Incarnational ministry follows God's pattern in Christ. God sent his Son to live with and bring grace to the lives of people. Christ likewise sends his followers to do the same. Moreover, as the incarnate Son, Jesus connected with people and adapted his ministry to their circumstances. He fed the hungry; forgave the guilty; comforted the broken-hearted; healed the sick; and rebuked the self-righteous. Following this example, emerging churches endeavor to incarnate God's grace in their local context. For the Crossings in Acton, it means to transform apartments used for the sex-trade into safe and affordable housing for mentally disabled people. For The Story in Sarnia, it means providing incubator space for micro-businesses. For The Commons in Hamilton, it means supporting and building relationships with the permanent residents of East Hamilton.

7. Comprehensive, not Compartmental Spirituality

7.1. Holistic Spirituality

Emerging Christians embrace a comprehensive rather than compartmental spirituality. Though many of the congregants come from more or less traditional evangelical church backgrounds, they reject this tradition's individualized and spiritualized view of the gospel. They retain the notion that grace transforms the individual and calls for a life of discipleship. They see this process, however, as something that encompasses their whole lives. Christian spirituality does not consist in tacking on a set of spiritual disciplines and church activities. Christian spirituality comprehends every dimension of a person's life. It entails where and how Christians live, where they work, and the type and amount of food and consumer items they buy. The experience of grace and following Christ is about realizing the justice and renewal of God's kingdom in all dimensions of life in this world and not waiting for transport to a celestial heaven. The Gospel is not a superadditum, but essential to the rest of their lives.

The holistic spirituality of emerging Christians can be understood as a reaction to the privatization of religion. Privatization is part of the broader secularization theory. The view holds that under the process of secularization religion has less and less relevance for peoples' lives. Religion becomes sequestered to the sphere of personal morality, family, and social networks. Reginald W. Bibby, W. E. Hewitt, and Wade Clark Roof suggest that this process is well underway in Canada. They argue, "extensive analyses of religion's impact on everyday life . . . reveal that religion, relegated as it is to a specialized commodity, has limited influence. Indeed, Canadians do not even offer the pretense that religion has an impact beyond a limited realm, readily acknowledging that other factors are more important determinants of life" ([20], p. 241). Taking a contrarian viewpoint, however, they also maintain that privatization does not entail the end of religious affiliation and activity ([20], p. 248–49). Holistic spirituality is an answer to the disconnection many Christians experience between their faith and the rest of their lives. A key reason why many emerging adults feel alienated from the church is the privatization of religion. This phenomenon in Canada coheres with what Kinnaman observes among a group of emerging adults he calls "Exiles." They feel that their Christian faith has little or nothing to say to their professional calling, career, and talents ([12], p. 78). Though Kinnaman treats emerging adults in the United States, their counterparts in Canada have similar sentiments. Moreover, holistic spirituality is an effort among emerging Canadian Christians to develop a form of Christianity that speaks not only to a narrow religious dimension, but also to the full range of their lives.

7.2. Everything is Spiritual

Emerging Christians want every area of their life renewed and transformed by God's grace. They reject the sacred-secular dualism of the modern culture and contemporary evangelical Christianity. Everything for them is spiritual. A counterpoint might be that if everything is spiritual than nothing is. Desacralizing life is, of course, not the emerging Christians' intent. Moreover, describing all life as spiritual does not reduce everything to the mundane. It frames the totality of human life in relationship to God. But what does this mean for the emerging in concrete terms?

In a sermon an emerging pastor remarked that freedom in Christ is the freedom to disadvantage ourselves for the sake of others. Nice pulpit rhetoric, but what does he mean? He means the choice to

buy fair-trade consumer items and local produce and to shop at local businesses. Following Jesus informs where you buy your cup of coffee. He believes that purchasing coffee at a locally owned shop supports a livable quality of life for a family and contributes to the health and renewal of the local community. Spending money at an international chain coffee shop supports minimum wage jobs, while most of the money leaves the local community to fund corporate profits. He believes that the values of God's kingdom should inform Christian consumption patterns. Christians should spend their money in ways that support the dignity and livelihood of workers and not the exploitation of either domestic and/or foreign workers.

The call for self-sacrifice from this pastor is not pious posturing. Upward mobility to a large church and higher salary would be effortless given his preaching and leadership talents. Yet, he receives a part time salary from the church, works a night shift at a health care facility, and lives in the dilapidated old urban neighborhood of his church [18]. His understanding (along with many members of the congregation who have moved to the downtown area of the church) of the gospel is comprehensive. His relationship with God encompasses all the dimensions of his life—vocation, where to live, shop, *etc.* Christian spirituality is not a religious silo. Of course, Christian spirituality involves church involvement and practice of “spiritual” disciplines. Explicitly religious activities, however, are not the only or even the principal arena of Christian spirituality. Indeed, for many emerging Christians all life is spiritual; a non-spiritual domain does not exist. Moreover, their holistic spirituality is not limited to a social justice concern as in the above examples. It extends to various forms of engagement with the community that the traditional church would not recognize as “spiritual” activities. For example, Third Space in Peterborough sponsors Word Up at the Spill. Word Up is a free verse spoken word event for community poets. The venue is the Spill, a locally owned and operated coffee shop. Eucharist in East Hamilton participates in the Hamilton Arts Festival.

8. Conclusions

The popular narrative of religion in Canada is the rise of secularization and the decline of Christianity. Though an accurate description of the broad trajectory of Canadian culture, it does not account for the evolution of a new type of evangelical Christianity—the emerging Christians and churches. Emerging Christians have left behind the traditional suburban and middle class evangelical church, but not their faith and commitment to Christian community. Though united in their perception of the banality of the evangelical church, emerging Christians and churches are otherwise diverse. Emerging Christians primarily come from younger and middle to upper middle class demographic groups, but from older and working class groups as well. Their churches come in many forms, such as new monastic communities, social enterprise churches, and third space churches. Their rejection of traditional institutional forms of Christianity reflects continuity with the larger religious trend toward secularization in Canada. Their turn to alternative forms of faith, which are vital and even radical, however, stands in contrast to this process. Emerging Christians and churches are an evangelical adaption to the collapse of Christendom and the Post-Christian condition of contemporary Canadian culture.

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