

Reforming Ecclesiology in Emerging Churches

Abstract: The rapid growth of “emerging” churches worldwide provides a new opportunity for reflection on the nature and task of the church. This article briefly outlines some of the tensions this movement raises in relation to the traditional “marks” of the church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic). It identifies some ways toward a reconstructive and reformatory ecclesiology that also recognizes that followers of the way of Christ are multiple, embedded, particular, and hospitable.

What exactly are “emerging churches”? Why are they evoking so much enthusiasm (and concern) across the theological spectrum and in such a wide variety of cultural contexts? The answer to the first question is more complex than it might initially seem. In this essay, I will generally follow Tony Jones’s use of terms in *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*.¹ “Emerging churches” will refer to new forms of church life arising in our late modern context, “emergents” to those practitioners worldwide inspired by and involved in this renewal and refiguration of the living Christian tradition, and “Emergent” to the relational network founded in 1997 (sometimes called “Emergent Village”). Several recent books have shed light on this multifaceted phenomenon that has variously been called a movement, a conversation, a friendship, and a new Reformation.²

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

2. See Doug Paggit and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Mark Scandrette, *Soul Graffiti: Making a Life in the Way of Jesus* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

Rather than reiterate the empirical results and practical reflections found in this literature, my focus here will be on the second question, with special attention to the significant theological challenges that emerging churches raise for ecclesiology and the self-understanding of the nature and task of the Christian church. While much of the debate has been over the validity and value of emerging churches, which are growing rapidly across traditional denominational boundaries and contesting old organizational structures, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which they challenge the very idea of what it means to be (or become) church.

Many of these communities resist the self-identification of the title "church," preferring names like "Solomon's Porch," "Jacob's Well," and "Emmaus Way." Many do not have (or want) their own buildings, pastors, or regular weekly meetings. We might ask in what sense these emerging communities are actually "churches." That depends, of course, on our definition of the term.

Emerging Churches?

In a definition that still serves as a starting point for contemporary sociologists of religion, Ernst Troeltsch famously defined a church as "that type of organization which is overwhelmingly conservative, which to a certain extent accepts the secular order, and dominates the masses; in principle, therefore, it is universal, i.e., it desires to cover the whole life of humanity." Troeltsch distinguished this from the (comparatively smaller) groups he called sect-types, which "aspire after personal inward perfection [and] aim at a direct personal fellowship between the members of each group. . . . They are forced to organize themselves in small groups and to renounce the idea of dominating the world. . . . They have no desire to control and incorporate [secular, political] forms of social life."³

These definitions worked well in the early twentieth century, but anyone familiar with emerging churches will immediately recognize that they do not fit either of these traditional "types." We are dealing with a new form (or a family of evolving forms) of being in religious community in late-modern culture. Attending to these sociological dynamics would require at least another article, but let me note briefly the conclusion of Heelas and Woodhead's massive *Religion in Modern Times*: "In short, we predict that a wide variety of religions will continue to coexist, but that the winners will be those which put

3. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 331.

people in touch with a God beyond self, make a difference, sustain supportive and affective communities, emphasize experience, have a political or economic job to do, and empower.”⁴

Contemporary Christians might resist the language of “winners” for theological reasons, but the fact that many emerging churches fit this description quite well is too significant to be ignored. The movement provides us with a theological opportunity to explore new ways of defining—or better, imaging—what “church” could be.

Reforming Ecclesiology?

Emergents are interested in—indeed, almost obsessed with—challenging old forms of church structuration and finding new forms of following the way of Jesus Christ in late-modern culture. They aim to become communities in which people feel welcomed to express their concerns about traditional theological positions and encouraged to explore new ways of formulating their faith without condemnation or the threat of exclusion. As Tony Jones points out in his chapter “The Theology, Stupid,” emergents “believe that theology is local, conversational, and temporary. To be faithful to the theological giants of the past, emergents endeavor to continue their theological dialogue.”⁵

One sense in which emergents are interested in reforming ecclesiology, therefore, is their willingness to deconstruct old formulations of the nature of “the church” in order to *reconstruct* new ways of thinking about and practicing communion among followers of Jesus Christ in contemporary societies. But emergents also tend to believe that theology—and so any “doctrine” of the church—ought to nourish the community and engender the transformation of persons in the world. This suggests an interest in ecclesiology that reforms; theological efforts to articulate the identity (and agency) of the church should emerge out of and be oriented toward reformation. If forms of church life are not reformative, why hold on to them? For many conservatives (and some liberals) the primary goal of ecclesiology seems to be defending the status quo of one’s preferred tradition. Emergents are more concerned to develop (and always be developing) a *reformative* ecclesiology.

One way to begin clarifying the difference that emerging communities might make for the ongoing dialogue about the nature and task of the church

4. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *Religion in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 495.

5. Jones, *New Christians*, 111.

is by exploring the traditional four “marks” (or “notes”) of the church derived from the creedal formula: “We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” This formulation, which itself emerged in a particular (ancient Roman, Neoplatonic) context, has played a significant role in ecclesial self-understanding over the centuries. Brian McLaren, one of the best-known facilitators of the Emergent conversation, touches on these four characteristics of the church briefly and appreciatively in *A Generous Orthodoxy*.⁶

The following four sections of this essay offer a more critical engagement with this traditional formulation, exploring some of emergents’ concerns about “the church” by challenging the way in which the four “marks” have been and sometimes continue to be used to protect those in power and to exclude those most in need of concrete, compassionate care. If emergents have anything in common, it is a desire to embrace the prophetic, the enthusiastic, and even the mystical as they move toward reformative ways of being and becoming in community as followers of the way of Jesus. In what follows, my intention is not to deny the intuitions that gave rise to these four ways of marking “the church” but to suggest that one of the things emerging churches can help us see is that these marks may not tell the whole story or provide the only (or final) word on churchliness.

The Church Is One? (or, What’s the Point of *Ecumenism*?)

In what sense is the church one? This ecclesial “mark” is usually taken to indicate the unity (or unicity) of the church. In other words, the creed claims that, despite appearances, the true church is not divided or many but singular and unified. Support for this notion usually involves an appeal to the Pauline image of the “one body” of Christ or the Johannine vision of Jesus’ disciples as “one,” as the Father and Son are “one.” It is important to recognize that this patristic creedal formulation of imagined ecclesial unity emerged during the philosophical reign of Neoplatonic metaphysics, which strongly privileged the “the One” over “the Many,” and the political reign of Roman Christian emperors, whose concern was to maintain the unity of the empire even if this required the destruction or expulsion of differentiating forces.

In other words, the discourse of the early ecumenical councils was shaped by the categories of Greek ontology and sponsored by Constantine and his

6. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 222–24.

successors; it is no surprise that diversity and plurality were forced into conformity or quieted into submission to the “one.” The empirical fact that the church was divided and multiple required the projection of the idea of a “true” church that exists (or will exist?) in an allegedly invisible realm (akin to Plato’s immutable world of “Ideas”), distinct from the visible, temporal, and material existence of actual churches. This ideal of an eternalized, perfect, pure “bride of Christ” was used to authorize a Constantinian enforcement of unity and erasure of difference, which was taken as a sign of fault or blemish.

In later centuries, under other empires, Christians have been tempted to grasp at this idealized unity by a similar enforcement or erasure, either pulling others toward acceptance of an allegedly universal core held in common by all or pushing others out of communion in order to protect the unicity of one’s own favored organizational structure. The early modern ecumenical movement sometimes gave in to the former temptation, while particular denominations occasionally gave in to the latter. The *Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* acknowledges that difference ought to be valued and celebrated, but it also warns that diversity can easily be conscripted “to sinful purposes” and insists that unity is a divine gift.⁷ This may be true, but the *Proposal* fails to acknowledge that the drive for *unity* can also be conscripted by sinners, including church bureaucrats obsessed with forcing everyone into one and the same box, namely, “the one” in which they are comfortably in control.

While many (if not most) emergents maintain the unity of the church as an ideal in some sense, they tend to be less anxious about the obvious plurality and diversity that characterizes the actual state of ecclesial affairs. This leads them to view the purpose of ecumenical dialogue in quite a different way. The goal of welcoming an encounter with a multiplicity of “others” is not to manipulate them into conforming to an idealized sameness but to find new possibilities for transformation precisely within the generative complexity of differentiating forces. This openness is in part due to emergents’ willingness to engage positively with what might be called the philosophical “turn to alterity” in late modernity, associated with thinkers such as Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, and Ricoeur.

In other words, the “ecumenical” efforts of emergents are aimed at both reconstructing the identity of the church mediated by encountering alterity and reforming the communal practices within and across de-nominating boundaries. Ironically, this attitude of ongoing reformational engagement with

7. Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten, eds., *In One Body through the Cross: Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 28.

“others” has opened up interpersonal space and time for deep and authentic dialogue about and within differences and fostered the practice of collaborative networking more effectively than many of the efforts of official representatives of various ecclesial hierarchies.⁸ Emergents are multiplying, and for most of those participating in the movement this multiplicity is perceived not as a challenge but as an opportunity for forging transversally differentiated networks oriented by and toward *reformativ*e communion that empowers persons to share in the self-giving love of Jesus’ way of acting in the world. Isn’t this what church should be?

The Church Is *Holy*? (or, What’s the Point of *Missions*?)

The term “holy” typically refers to objects set apart for sacred (as opposed to profane) use or to persons considered righteous or saintly (as opposed to sinful). When applied to the church, the holiness of the community indicates a sense of being set apart and called out for a special purpose in redemptive history. Unfortunately the opposition implicit in such distinctions too often comes to the fore in alienating, isolating, and destructive ways. Analogous to the “Constantinian” ecumenical obsession with a certain kind of unity is what we might call a “colonial” missional obsession. When the task of missions arises out of a sense of identity that depends on a sharp distinction between us (holy) and them (unholy), it can easily lead to modes of outreach that colonize—reaching out to make others in our same image, erasing their difference from us.

On this model, being holy means avoiding contamination with “the world”—refusing to commune with the unholy except for the sake of assimilating them, increasing the number of individual saints, and reducing the number of individual sinners. Add a healthy dose of predestinarian “irresistible grace,” and one gets the missional motto: resistance is futile. In his most recent book, Brian McLaren points to the importance of acknowledging the churches’

8. As I have written elsewhere, toward the end of the *Princeton Proposal for Unity*, “the authors observe that Christian individuals and groups who do *not* have an official institutional standing have greater freedom for new initiatives. They recognize themselves as fitting within this class: ‘precisely because we do not function in this group as official representatives of our churches we can speak more freely.’ The Proposal therefore emphasizes ‘that those unconstrained by bureaucratic roles and free from the limitations of official leadership have a distinctive call to the service of unity’ (51). There is surely some irony here. Those who have the most freedom to do what the church is allegedly called to do are those who are not officially authorized to do so. We are left to wonder what will happen to such free-thinkers once a unity of sameness is produced that must be visibly enforced by the constrained and constraining efforts of official church bureaucrats in all places and at all times.” F. LeRon Shults, “Tending to the Other in Late Modern Missions and Ecumenism,” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 95, no. 4 (2007): 432.

contribution to colonial practices in the past and calls for an engagement with the concerns of “postcolonial” analyses of social and global crises.⁹

Elsewhere, I have traced the significance of the shift in the anthropological understanding of the categories “us” and “them” for ecclesial participation in the agency of Jesus Christ in contemporary cultures.¹⁰ For the purposes of this essay, the point is that emergents’ resistance to a missional approach that colonizes the other is reflected in theological commitments to more dynamic models of ecclesial identity as wholly *embedded* in the relational life of “the world.”

This ecclesial mark is also connected to the doctrine of salvation. The early church father Cyprian’s claim that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (there is no salvation outside the church) has often been interpreted as a strict exclusion of those who are not declared members of the official church from the class of persons who can be declared “holy” (set apart). In light of late-modern social-scientific interpretations of human cultural structuration, such a hard distinction between inside and outside is empirically impossible and philosophically naive.

More important, however, this ancient dictum has also sometimes been used to support a model of salvation in which the primary focus is on individuals who are called upon to make a cognitive decision about particular propositions (related to Jesus) in order to ensure that their souls will go to heaven. Many emergents want to focus more strongly on the way in which embodied communal life here and now is being redemptively transformed, reordered in salutary ways that manifest justice in the world. In a certain sense, then, one could say that *all* salvation is “outside” the church.

The attribution of holiness to the church also has to do with the *Holy* Spirit. Another famous ecclesial motto, taken from Irenaeus, says that “where the church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the church.” Clearly, the holiness of communities that follow Christ is dependent on the dynamic presence of the divine Spirit. However, this presence is not contained by the walls of the church or the souls of the saints; the Spirit hovers over the face of the earth, enlivens all creatures, blows where it wills, disturbs and comforts persons across national, cultural, and even religious boundaries. If Spirit and salvation (making holy) are connected, why would we think that either is limited to “the” church or dependent on particular ecclesial settings?

9. Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 44–45.

10. F. LeRon Shults, *Christology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), chap. 3.

As Tony Jones has recently observed, many American evangelical churches are essentially binitarian, focusing on the logic of the relation between the Father and the Son in a way that obscures the surprising Spirit who rips apart old wineskins. He suggests that “when a church places undue emphasis on its programs, buildings, staffing, or other human inventions, reliance on the Holy Spirit has most likely been lost.”¹¹ Emergents are concerned with construing the process of becoming holy in a way that is *reformatory*. They have seen how the isolationist tendencies and colonizing policies of many evangelical missionary efforts are sadly intertwined. Instead of insisting on their own holiness—in contrast to and apart from sinners—emerging churches struggle to be wholly *embedded* within the concrete redemptive work of the Spirit throughout the world in the manner of Jesus Christ.

The Church Is *Catholic*? (or, What’s the Point of *Polity*?)

The Greek term *katholikos* literally indicates universality (or wholeness), referring to the totality of the church. In its original usage, it did not refer to the *Roman Catholic Church*, which today represents one particular form of ecclesial existence (although some do believe it is the one *and only* holy, apostolic church). One traditional way of spelling out the catholicity of the church has been to deal with the question of polity. How are individual churches bound together as a whole? Within particular congregations, how does the ordained minister or priest function as a representative of the whole?

In other words, what are the right policies by which we can ensure that communion among the holy is appropriately *policed*—that is, managed in an orderly way that submits to the legislation and regulation of a universal (or universalizable) hierarchically structured unity. Here one often finds debates in the tradition among (for example) Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, arguing that the “biblical” model of church organization indicates primary leadership by bishops, presbyters, or parochially governed pastors, respectively.

Emerging communities can be found in a wide variety of denominations, including those representing Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Anabaptist traditions (and many others), as well as in prisons, coffeehouses, and other nontraditional contexts.¹² However, emergents tend not to worry overly much about determining the “right” polity and are generally willing to

11. Jones, *New Christians*, 203.

12. See the essays in Pagitt and Jones, *Emergent Manifesto*. For a list of groups from a variety of denominational backgrounds, see <http://www.emergentvillage.com>.

deconstruct old models that once worked well in the past in order to reconstruct new, always evolving models that respect the particularity of each new context. This is one reason that emergent-like movements are also popping up throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa.

One of the main issues in polity is the management of the sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist. Although not all or even most emerging churches are Pentecostal or charismatic, they do tend to emphasize the Holy Spirit more than their evangelical forebears. The New Testament certainly emphasizes being immersed in the life-giving presence of the Spirit more than it does the ritual of water baptism, and life in the Spirit is not about being secured within a static universal whole but about practical transformation and work in the particular dynamics of concrete life in the world.

Some churches protect the “wholeness” of the community by excluding particular others from the Eucharist, a practice that seems in conflict with Jesus’ own approach to table fellowship. Emergents are willing to challenge such exclusionary practices as inappropriately mired in medieval assumptions about substances or early modernist assumptions about efficient causality.¹³ As Scot McKnight suggests, the Lord’s Supper is “not a meal so much in need of protection as it is a meal in need of missional extension. . . . If a person seeks for grace, this is where we want them to come.”¹⁴

The understanding and practice of ordination have shifted over the centuries, but it has too often functioned as a way of attempting to police the “whole” church. The (male) priest represents Christ as the universal head, dispensing grace through the sacraments to those parts of the body deemed worthy. After the industrial revolution and throughout the twentieth century, “the ministry” became increasingly professionalized and management-oriented, especially among Protestant churches. This reflected the early-modern interest in control through strict organizational hierarchies. While such ways of policing the community may have made sense to past generations, emergents increasingly find such models oppressive and offensive, preferring more open-ended, dynamic models of self-organization. To quote Tony Jones’s nineteenth dispatch from the emergent frontier: “Emergents downplay—or outright reject—the differences between clergy and laity.”¹⁵

13. For an exploration of the relational significance of the sacraments, see chap. 5 of F. LeRon Shults and Stephen J. Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

14. Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 54.

15. Jones, *New Christians*, 204.

Challenging such hard dichotomies between ordained and not ordained opens up new ways to think about being “in the ministry.” The Greek word for minister (*diakonos*) means “servant.” If ministering is about serving, we might wonder why it is so often depicted as only for an elite class. One of the implications of emerging churches for reforming ecclesiology is that polity (any and all “political” orientations) ought to enhance the mutual service among persons in concrete community. This raises new kinds of questions, such as: Should affluent white heterosexual males be ordained?

If being ordained means having special control over the management of ecclesial services, the answer should probably be no. The last people we want in charge are ones from this privileged class, who have been socialized into roles that encourage individualism and dominance over others. Such an answer will be frightening to those church politicians invested in the hierarchical and financial structures of their denomination. Many emergents have experienced the way in which facing and overcoming such fears can lead to ecclesial forms of communion that foster delight in self-giving service on behalf of particular others. In other words, attending to our fear of losing control can open us up to following the path of the servant of YHWH, whose ministry in the Spirit expressed precisely this kind of love in redemptive fellowship.

The Church Is Apostolic? (or, What’s the Point of Tradition?)

The fourth “mark” of the church is its apostolicity. On the one hand, this has to do with the practice of ordination. Within many traditional ecclesiastical polities, the laying on of hands that sets a person apart as clergy is understood as operating effectively only if grace is transmitted through an apostolic succession that can be traced back to the original twelve disciples. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, this succession is putatively secured through the papal line beginning with the apostle Peter, who is taken to be the primary vicar of Christ.

On the other hand, the “apostolic” nature and task of the church raises a broader set of questions. Regardless of one’s preferred polity, how are we to understand the relation between contemporary followers of Jesus Christ and the early Christians? Here we are dealing with debates over the appropriate way of relating to the *tradition*, an issue that brings us right to the heart of the challenge (and opportunity) raised by the emerging church movement.

Claiming to be part (or the whole) of the Christian church means claiming to have some link with the tradition that emerged in response to the life, death,

and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But already in the early Christian community, we find two very different ways of being so connected. In his book *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, Ray Anderson makes a distinction between the “Jerusalem” model, which tended to focus inwardly, relating primarily to the *past* by maintaining historical precedent, and the “Antioch” model, which tended to be oriented outwardly, relating to the *present* authority of the Spirit of Christ who is always renewing the praxis of the community as it welcomes the arrival of the reign of God in each new context.¹⁶ Although these centripetal (Jerusalem) and centrifugal (Antioch) forces are only ideal types, clearly emergents are more open to the latter than many of their conservative evangelical relatives.

There is much debate even among those who self-identify as emergents over doctrinal formulations in some particular traditions, especially over themes such as the substitutionary theory of atonement and the inerrancy of the Bible. However, as emergents increasingly interact with followers of the way of Jesus Christ in other contexts such as Europe, Asia, and Africa, they are learning that such debates are only occurring (for the most part) in the United States or in areas colonized by American evangelical subculture. This is because the philosophical categories driving such formulations are not “apostolic” but are linked to legalistic and literalistic assumptions that hardened in an early modern Western context, assumptions that continue to structure so much of the dialogue in that subculture. As emergents in the United States begin to network globally, they are increasingly developing the critical capacities and courage to protest even more strongly against those who claim to have figured out and re-present “the” tradition.

Another way of spelling out the apostolic character of the church is by tending to the literal meaning of the term *apostolos*—one who is sent out with a mission. As we have seen, churches can too easily identify their mission as a colonizing of the other. An exclusive focus on the idea that “we” are sent to “them” can reinforce missiologies of aggression and invasion. Becoming ecclesial involves not only sending but also *receiving*.

In addition to taking good news to others, the church ought also to be open to learning something new and good from authentic encounters with difference. For many emergents, sharing in the apostolic mission of Christ takes the form of providing *hospitable* space and time for hearing other voices. This

16. Ray Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), esp. chap. 1.

requires an openness to the transformative possibilities of the future that does not too quickly silence others by enforcing the same legal regulations that guided one's tradition in the past. Emergents are less worried about the dangers associated with risking an overly hospitable attitude toward the aliens among us than they are about the dangers associated with (medieval and modernist) strategies for manipulating others into agreement.

Here too we should ask whether this way of coming to be "apostolic" is *reformatory*? One way of relating to the biblical tradition is supporting (one's particular version of) the status quo. Another way is to conserve its living intuitions by liberating them for transformative dialogue with and practical immersion in late-modern culture. For more and more emergents, this means that ecclesial becoming takes shape as an active engagement in the world that works for the liberation of those who have been oppressed on the basis of differences like race, class, and gender—to bring good news to the poor by setting captives free. This is precisely the way of acting that characterized the life of the one whom Christians believe was *sent* into the world as a manifestation of the infinite divine hospitality that receives others into loving communion.

Emergent and *Always* Emerging?

The Emergent movement in the United States has often been pressured, usually by its critics, to develop a "statement of faith." As I have argued elsewhere, caving in to the pressure to petrify the conversation in such a statement would indeed make the movement easier to control, but such a move would be unnecessary, inappropriate, and disastrous.¹⁷ The demand itself presupposes early-modern notions of language and hermeneutics, as well as an ontology that privileges stasis over movement. Such a *state*-ment would allow its critics to dissect it and then place it in a theological museum alongside other dead conceptual specimens the curators find opprobrious. But living, moving things do not belong in museums. Whatever else Emergent may be, it is a *movement* committed to encouraging the lively pursuit of God and to inviting others into a delightfully terrifying conversation along the way.

This does not mean, as some critics will assume, that emergents do not care about belief or that there is no role at all for propositions. Any good conversation includes propositions, but they should serve the process of inquiry rather

17. This originally appeared online at http://leronshults.typepad.com/my_weblog/2006/12/emergent_statem.html. It has been reprinted as appendix C in Jones, *New Christians*.

than shut it down. Emerging churches are dynamic rather than static, which means that their ongoing intentionality is (and may it ever be) shaped less by an anxiety about finalizing statements than it is by an eager attention to the dynamism of the Spirit's disturbing and comforting presence that is *always* reforming us by calling us into an ever-intensifying participation in the Son's welcoming of others into the faithful embrace of God.

The idea that the church is and should always be emerging can be frightening for those who are anxious about maintaining psychological and political control. However, this fear can be cast out by an intense love for the eternal advent of the reformatory power of divine grace. Those of us nurtured by the Reformed tradition have our own motivation to attend to the ongoing emergent reformation of the church: *ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda*. Other traditions have their own resources as well. The growth of emerging churches worldwide can play a special role in opening us all to a reforming ecclesiology. Reflection on and the practice of becoming a fellowship of saints is less about circling the wagons to protect the past than it is about opening up to the work of the Spirit leading into new frontiers and new forms of exploration into God.

Conclusion

My argument in this article has not been that the creedal "marks" of the church are wrong, but only that they are not exhaustive. When interpreted in absolute and exclusive terms, noting the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church may in fact be misleading; these may actually mark forms of religious community that have little to do with Jesus' way of knowing, acting, and being in the world.

- Yes, followers of this way ought to work for *unity* in love, but this does not require the denial or denigration of the *multiplicity* of expressions of that love. The many forms of ecclesial becoming can serve together in the infinite ecumenics of divine grace.
- Yes, churches are called to become *holy*, but this does not require isolationist walls that protect "our" sacrality from "their" supposed profanity. Missional care in the way of Christ is *embedded* in the concrete, mundane concerns of oppressed others.
- Yes, Christian communities ought to be characterized by a *universal* embracing love, but this does not require an anxious political exclusion of others. Different polities can facilitate the service of the church while celebrating the *particularity* of each context.

- Yes, becoming ecclesial involves making clear our connection with the first *apostles*, but this does not require a blind repetition of the tradition. Followers of Jesus can be identified by their receptive *hospitality* to, for, and with their neighbors and enemies.

Emerging churches worldwide have a great deal to teach us about reconstructing ecclesiology and reforming our communities in ways that mark them as faithfully participating in Jesus' way of knowing, acting, and being in the world.