

**SPIRITUAL DIRECTION, THE KINGDOM,  
AND THE EMERGING CHURCH**

**by**

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God beneath you  
God in front of you  
God behind you  
God above you

(St Patrick quoted in Rohr, 2003 p. 57)

## INTRODUCTION

We are currently seeing thousands of new churches beginning throughout the western world, pioneered largely by young leaders who are mostly disenchanted evangelicals and Pentecostals. They see the assumptions and practices of the churches in which they grew up, and in many cases pastored, to be heavily influenced by modernism and consumerism and are bravely beginning new ventures which are experimental and risky, and consequently often tenuous and short-lived. They are seeking to begin new forms of church that are effective in a post-modern world. This movement has been labelled, for want of a better term, the emerging church.

Spiritual direction is a discipline, ancient in origin and practice, which is being discovered for the first time by many of today's evangelical Protestants. When we look at the underlying beliefs of those involved in the emerging church movement, we notice a degree of commonality with those of spiritual direction. What do they have in common, what can the emerging church learn from the art of spiritual direction, and what can spiritual direction give to this movement and its leaders?

## WHAT IS THE EMERGING CHURCH?

Although we could argue about the appropriateness of the label 'emerging church' and the grouping together of such diverse ventures, certain common features have begun to emerge in recent years, enough to characterize a movement. Gibbs and Bolger (2005) are among the first to produce a significant study of the patterns of the emerging church worldwide, interviewing fifty leaders over a period of five years. They identify nine practices that characterise emerging churches. Although Gibbs and Bolger's study is short on critical appraisal, their nine identified practices will serve us well in giving a framework for our discussion.

### 1. IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS

There is no more seminal understanding driving the emerging church movement than the belief that the Kingdom of God is present in the here and now. Dallas Willard, Brian McLaren and N. Tom Wright are three who have been influential in making this understanding more accessible in the evangelical (and 'post evangelical' world) and have clearly influenced the 'emergents'. Willard (1998, p. 28) stresses that 'this kingdom' is not something to be 'accepted' now and only enjoyed later, but something to be entered now .

It is a world in which God is continually at play, and over which he continually rejoices. Until our thoughts of God have found every visible thing and event glorious with his presence, the word of Jesus has not yet fully seized us.

The emphasis is on kingdom, not church, the invitation is to participate in God's activity in this world more so than to prepare oneself for another world. Gibbs and Bolger (1995, p. 55) quote an emerging church practitioner:

A lot of church people... try to believe in Jesus so that when they die they get to go to heaven. Populating heaven is the main part of the gospel. Instead the gospel is about being increasingly alive to God in the world. It is concerned with bringing heaven to earth.

For emerging churchers, participation in the kingdom now is largely focussed on a fresh realization of how Jesus lived in this world. For them, identifying with Jesus, the embodiment of the kingdom, results in a very real participation in the kingdom in the here and now.

The discipline of spiritual direction is based on the belief that God communicates and the directee responds in the here and now, the task in spiritual direction being to companion a directee in attending and responding to the nearby indications and manifestations of God. God is not only omnipresent, but actively engaged in the everyday life of individuals. Hughes (2003, p. 20): "If God is immanent, then God is present in all things, vibrant in every atom."

It is a remarkable and courageous leap for the evangelical raised in a modernist context to come to this position regarding the kingdom that is now adopted by the emerging church pioneers. Yet to fully inhabit that position requires more than a fresh reading of the gospels. As the contemplatives unhesitatingly point out, it requires a long and intense journey of deconstruction. Jamieson (2002, 2004) is one who has tracked the experiences of numbers of evangelicals and Pentecostals through that traumatic journey. In this the brave emergents need to pay attention to the wisdom gained over the centuries through the developed art of spiritual direction, and indeed emergent practitioners might benefit from attaching themselves to a spiritual director for that journey.

## 2. TRANSFORMING SECULAR SPACE

Emerging churches mark a shift to a 'whole of life' spirituality, recognising the work of God in what were formerly seen as unspiritual things or motivations. "To emerging churches, all of life must be made sacred" (Gibbs and Bolger, p. 66). Two voices recently rising to prominence in the evangelical church are those of Frost and Hirsch (2003) who are critical of the prevalent 'attractational' model of church where people 'out there' are invited to come 'in here' to find God. They advocate an 'incarnational' model in which there is engagement "with the rhythms of life of the host culture and a genuine listening to their hopes and fears" (p. 39). Many emergents align themselves with this thinking.

Gerard Hughes and Richard Rohr are two who give a contemporary voice to the contemplative tradition and the discipline of spiritual direction. Hughes gives an effective critique of the imposed sacred / secular split in his *God In All Things* (2003, p. 3-15). Rohr invites us to an attunement to God in the whole of life in his wonderful *Everything Belongs* (2003). The skilled spiritual director will help her directee to use a starting point from somewhere in the broad experience of daily life to fully attend to the God who is present. The discipline of spiritual direction leads us to a deeper experience of 'three-way listening' – listening to others (including the community around us), to ourselves, and to God.

The danger for the emergent leaders is that, in their commendable enthusiasm to be 'missional' and be involved in the community, they will not adequately enough do the journey of entering and lingering in the place of listening to that community and attunement to the God presence already there. The evangelical programming towards action runs deep! Although it is only reasonable to expect that many ventures will be

short-lived in such a time of experimentation, emergents should take time to evaluate whether, at least in some cases, there hasn't been a thorough and prolonged enough attending. The experience of spiritual direction will help them move towards a deeper listening.

### 3. LIVING AS COMMUNITY

Gibbs and Bolger (2005, pp. 90, 94, 100, 103) point out that, for the emergents, the church is primarily a people, not simply a place to meet... the focus is not a service but a way of life together... not a once or twice-a-week association but rather a community of continuous interaction that includes a range of activities related to every aspect of life.... not a place to visit but a dynamic that occurs when people who are journeying come together.

These emerging church aspirations to experience church as community ring much more true to the Biblical model than the all too prevalent experience of church as meetings, programs and superficial relationships. Yet we habitually retreat to the superficial because a long term commitment to true community is very, very difficult to maintain. Jean Varnier, deeply experienced in these matters through his establishment of l'Arche communities worldwide, writes (1989, p. 26):

So community life brings a painful revelation of our limitations, weaknesses and darkness; the unexpected discovery of the monsters within us is hard to accept. The immediate reaction is to try to destroy the monsters, or to hide them away again, pretending they don't exist. Or else we try to flee from community life and relationships with others, or to assume that the monsters are theirs, not ours. It is the others who are guilty, not us.

Here the voices of the mystics, so important to the development of the art of contemplative spiritual direction, need to be heeded. 'They strongly assert that our desires, our wants, our longings, our outward and inner searching, when uncovered, expressed and recognised, all lead to the Divine Beloved at the core.' (Ruffing, 2000, p. 11) We could add anger, jealousy, disappointment, fear, resentment and other reactive emotions likely to arise in a community setting to Ruffing's list of fruitful doorways which, somewhat surprisingly, lead to God, when one courageously attends to them. This necessary journey of attending and exploration on the road to true and lasting community, is often marked by trepidation, as experienced spiritual directors know well. Emergents need to be aware that being skilfully companioned in a safe setting will serve them well along this challenging way.

### 4. WELCOMING THE STRANGER

The sacred/secular divide inevitably resulted in a climate of exclusion. As a follow-on from the abandonment of that divide, 'emerging churches, as a matter of lifestyle, include the outsider, even those who are different, knowing that the "other" both clarifies and defines the boundaries of their faith.' (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005, p. 119) For them, hospitality is important, sharing meals is essential, as is providing a community marked by authentic relationships to which people can belong. We hear echoes of Jesus' invitation to those who would become his followers, often cited by spiritual directors: "Come and see." (John 1:39 KJV)

David Benner (2002, p. 46), speaking from the experience of spiritual direction, provides an affirmation for the emergents' priority on hospitality.

Soul friends show hospitality by making space in their lives for others..... the essence of hospitality is taking another person into my space, into my life. This is also the essence of being a soul friend.

However, going further, Benner (2002, p. 46, 47) provides a challenge to all of us, emergents included, pointing out that showing true hospitality necessarily involves us moving to a special place within ourselves:

Soul hosts prepare for their gift of hospitality by cultivating a place of quiet within themselves. This is the place where they will receive others. If I have no such place within myself, I am unable to offer myself in a gift of soul hospitality. But when I have begun to be a person with a quiet, still centre, I can invite others to come and rest there. It is out of this place, that soul friends offer their gifts of presence, stillness, safety and love..... Although I often try to pull it off, I know that I cannot really be present for another person when my inner world is filled with preoccupations and distractions.... Stillness is the precondition of presence.

## 5. SERVING WITH GENEROSITY

Commendably, emergents confront the habits of consumer churches through the practice of generosity, coming (like the kingdom) ‘unexpectedly as a gift and a surprise’ (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005, p. 140). Gifts include time, money and service given as an organic response, and are more likely to be given in the form of individual initiatives than through church administered programs. ‘They do not see their service as a means to a disguised end, but rather as an expression of the love of Christ.’ (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005, p. 145)

Nevertheless, there are other dimensions to the matter of serving with generosity, dimensions frequently explored in spiritual direction offered from a contemplative standpoint. We may well give to others without strings attached, but are we humble enough to believe that, if we are attentive, they will have a gift for us? Varnier writes (1988, pp. 77, 80):

People (in coming to give), need to be reminded that they have not come so much to do things, as to learn to be, and that they must not come like a mechanic with tools of knowledge and theory to repair what is broken. They must come to discover a secret, like a treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price. Or as a child about to receive a marvellous gift – a gift of relationship, a gift of friendship, the gift of light, love and wisdom hidden in the hearts of the poor and the lonely, the sick and the blind, in all those who are vulnerable and have nothing to lose..... To love is not to give of your riches but to reveal to others their riches, their gifts, their value, and to trust them and their capacity to grow.

## 6. PARTICIPATING AS PRODUCERS

If everyone has something to give, then everyone needs to be allowed and encouraged to participate. In emerging churches there is a high level of participation in worship, decision making, and every aspect of the community’s life and witness. Gibbs and Bolger (2005, p. 163) quote emerging church practitioner James Childs-Evans: ‘Groups must begin by asking what God has uniquely endowed this particular group to be and do. Groups can only be what their members are.’

Emergents acknowledge that allowing participation requires trust, but as Bakke points out in her book on spiritual direction, ‘at times, trusting is straightforward, uncomplicated and easy, at other times, however, trusting feels life threatening and at least potentially hazardous to something we hold dear.’ (2000, p. 61) The demand upon

the emerging church leader will be similar to that upon the spiritual director and entails, not primarily trusting others, but more so ‘to trust the Holy Spirit at work in and through another person..... Trusting in their competency or expertise is not our main objective. Instead we seek to trust God in them, and in the Holy Spirit through them.’ (Bakke, 2000, p. 73) As in the director-directee relationship, the call is towards trusting the Holy Spirit together in the emergent faith community. This is not to deny a role for discernment in the allocation of responsibilities in a faith community, but a leader, and indeed all community members, need to be of a mind to embark on a journey of discovery of how God communicates to and through others, and as Bakke writes, in that journey ‘I might discover a few surprises’. (2000, p. 76)

## 7. CREATING AS CREATED BEINGS

Emerging church leader Doug Pagitt (2004, pp. 133, 136) invites us to ‘imagine the Kingdom of God as the creative process of God reengaging in all that we know and experience..... so we have moved into our future with the idea that the Kingdom of God is synonymous with the creativity of God.’ Indeed Pagitt might be speaking as a true contemplative when he writes ‘a good work of art.... invites you to look inside of it, to explore it, to play inside it, and while you are in there, it is quietly and skilfully asking us to go back into the world changed.’ (2004, p. 138) How close Pagitt’s sentiments are to those expressed by Jones in his book on spiritual direction: ‘the artist, then, is an unknowing spiritual director, midwifing creation’s yearnings in general, and mining the *imago dei* within each of us in particular.’ (2002, p. 145) The emerging church is at the forefront of reassigning that spiritual direction role to the artist and the creative, a role that was largely discarded in the protestant church in the age of modernity. Perhaps emergents and spiritual directors can spur each other on in this.

## 8. LEADING AS A BODY

Leadership in emerging churches is shifting to facilitation – creating a space for things to occur, and for spiritual directors the goal is to promote a space for God to be seen and heard, for God to make something occur. The emergents are moving from vision casting by leadership to everyone sharing in direction setting and decision making. ‘Emerging churches, in their attempts to resemble the kingdom, avoid all types of control in their leadership formation..... If a leadership team is chosen, these leaders operate as spiritual directors, mentors and facilitators.’ (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005 p. 192, 215) Gibbs and Bolger trace developments within emerging churches from experimentation with leaderless groups to gift and passion based leadership, representative leadership, consensus based decision making and other forms. Clearly, this matter of leadership is still a thorny one for emerging churches wrestling with the matter of abandoning control structures.

This search for ways of discerning and implementing direction while abandoning control structures, is leading some emergents towards spiritual direction, with some pastors and even whole teams undergoing spiritual direction training. One leader expresses this motivation: ‘I want to fix someone, come up with a great answer, be the wise guy, but instead I need to listen.’ (Gibbs and Bolger, p. 212)

Gibbs and Bolger sum this up: ‘Leading in such a way that points to the presence of the kingdom – through servanthood and consensus expressed in collaboration – requires leaders to recognize that God’s kingdom always precedes them.’ (2005 p. 214) Small wonder then that this quest is drawing some emerging church leaders to the discipline of spiritual direction.

The emergents might do well to look at some past ventures into group spiritual direction, an ancient discipline in itself with many different manifestations from monastic communities to Quaker Clearness Committees. Rose Mary Dougherty's books *Group Spiritual Direction* (1995), and *The Lived Experience of Group Spiritual Direction* (2003) would be helpful in this.

#### 9. MERGING ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITIES

Spirituality is a major emphasis in emerging churches, more important than numbers gathered or even the celebrative nature of the worship. The real concerns are the extent to which lives are changing and gaining depth through the richness of encounters with God. Members of emerging churches recognize that there is no instant formula. Rather, spiritual disciplines have to be learned through costly exploration. They draw upon a variety of traditions and combine them in a creative mix. (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005 p. 234)

The emerging church is reflecting the postmodern rejection of modernism's 'ongoing strand of suspicion of interior experience as a road to God' (Edwards, 1980 p. 18), the suspicion that in part led to the decline in the popularity of spiritual direction as a discipline. Now with the increased openness in the community and in the emerging church to the validity of spiritual experience in different forms, the popularity of spiritual direction is again rising. The emerging church is valuing the insights and spiritual disciplines of days past as does spiritual direction which has mined their treasures over a very extended period of time. The challenge for the emerging church is to engage with these insights and disciplines in a respectful and meaningful way because their true treasure is in no way realized through a superficial sampling.

#### 10. THE KINGDOM WITHIN

As we have seen, the nature and importance of the Kingdom of God is central to the current movement labelled 'the emerging church' as it is also in the discipline of contemplative spiritual direction. This is revealed in the practices that characterize the movement. Clearly the emergents are seeking to explore and implement the assertions that the kingdom is present now and that the kingdom is near in the everyday and the close by. Our discussion has shown that another kingdom assertion perhaps needs to be more adequately explored and implemented if the movement is to bring significant, lasting change. It is perhaps the primary kingdom assertion of the art of spiritual direction: 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:21 KJV). Hughes (1985, p. 9) warns us that our best efforts without attention to this inner life will only result in empty 'religion':

'Our treasure lies in our inner life.... Religion should encourage us to become more aware of this inner life and should teach us how to befriend it, for it is the source of our strength and storehouse of our wisdom. Religion, as it is often presented and understood, not only fails to nurture this awareness, but sometimes even actively discourages it.'

As one looks at the initial impetus of many of the emerging church plants and at the views expressed on some their websites, one becomes aware of a striving seemingly fuelled by a reaction against, even at times, an anger. This is common, perhaps even necessary, in the pioneers of a new movement. Nevertheless, it needs to mature into a less reactionary assurance coming from a more peaceful place of freedom. This only

comes through a faithful commitment to the personal inner journey. Hughes (2003, p. 26):

Freedom is about being true to the deepest desires within us.... Freedom is costly, and freedom must begin from within. There is, in all of us, a strong resistance to freedom.

Richard Rohr (2003, pp. 45, 70) directs us to Jesus' teaching which seems more taken up directing followers to a faithful journey of deconstruction prior to any construction:

We must go inside the belly of the whale for a while. Then and only then will we be spit upon a new shore and understand our call.... Without an authentic inner freeing, we will inevitably reconstruct buildings that look surprisingly like the old ones we've knocked down!

Rohr (2003, p. 24) asserts that only centred people, that is people who are learning to live from their centre and identity in God, can truly begin to move beyond self interest and control:

People who have learned to live from their centre in God know which boundaries are worth maintaining and which can be surrendered, although it is this very struggle that often constitutes their deepest 'dark nights'.

It is a necessary discipline then on the road towards freedom - towards discovering the kingdom within - the discipline of submitting oneself to silence, to attending and to reflecting, in effect to heed the call of spiritual directors to 'be still and know that I am God'.

'That's what happens in the early stages of contemplation. We wait in silence. In silence all our usual patterns assault us. Our patterns of control, addiction, negativity, tension, anger and fear assert themselves. The first voices we hear are normally negative. They have paranoid and obsessive voices. They are agenda-driven and insecure voices. They are lustful and lazy voices.' (Rohr, 2003, pp. 75, 76)

To journey through this to discover the treasure within and to commit to this inner journey again and again can be daunting, but it is necessary in partnering with God in the wonderfully creative act of bringing about the kingdom in the external sense. Sanford writes (1987, p. 53):

'At some point.... There may come a desire on our part to stop the creative inner process, to decide, "This is enough; I need go no further." Often there then sets in a time of darkness and confusion worse than the first. Such an experience is a sure sign that the creative process of the kingdom will not be denied..... God can be harder on those who are close to him than on those who have never known him, precisely because they may achieve something creative.'

## CONCLUSION

The emerging church movement is an exciting movement towards freedom arising from a gathering worldwide desire to see the kingdom come in the postmodern world through a church different from the constraints and controls of the modernist mindset. It brings with it a freedom to gather from ancient as well as contemporary spiritual and church traditions, insights and disciplines. The discipline of spiritual direction is one with which it shares much natural affinity, and one in whose principles it can find a great treasure. If the emerging church is to be a movement of lasting significance, it would do well to engage deeply in the understanding and practice of these principles.

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