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The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture

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CHAPTER ONE

**The Church in
a Changing Landscape**





EMERGING CULTURE, THE EMERGING CHURCH, AND CHURCH IN TRANSITION

Recently, a national newspaper ran a front-page story about a Christian leader who sought to distance himself somewhat from the religious right. He expressed some remorse that he'd chosen political sides earlier in his ministry. Today, in an era when some theological conservatives refuse to share the podium with any who disagree with their views of salvation and theology, this leader now opens his events to sponsorship and participation by the full spectrum of Christianity. "If I took sides in all these different divisive areas," he contends, "I would cut off a great part of the people that I really want to reach." In the article, he carefully explains how the term *evangelism*—presenting the good news of the hope God offers humanity—differs from *evangelical*—the label chosen by some theologically conservative Christians. This leader remains passionately committed to proclaiming the gospel, as he has done throughout his long career. Yet he recognizes that a rapidly changing culture demands new approaches to ministry.

Who is this prominent leader? Perhaps an emerging church or post-evangelical voice such as Brian McLaren? Or a social activist such as Jim Wallis? No. This article was about Billy Graham.²

Although Billy Graham's goal to spread the good news has not changed over the last half century, his ministry now exhibits relaxed associations and shifts of method. Graham's subtle adjustments reflect dramatic changes in our culture during this timespan. Billy Graham recognizes that we live in an exciting time of transition and adaptation, where dominant worldviews, philosophies, and even theologies are either yielding or at least making room for a new era. This time of transition into a new cultural era has great implications—both opportunities and challenges—for Christianity and the church.



THE SIGNS OF CHANGE: THE EMERGING CULTURE

One of my neighbors recently stopped in for a long cup of coffee. As often happens, our conversation turned comfortably toward spirituality and religion. He was raised in the church, yet has often told me of his deep concerns about institutional Christianity. He and his wife and two children are all quite engaged spiritually, and he leads a weekly prayer and meditation group for teenagers in his home. Their family is very involved in local social issues, as well as hunger relief projects around the world. He and I share many of the same values and dreams for our community. And my wife, Mimi, and I have been influenced and motivated by their holistic vision of childrearing. He told me he'd be supportive if his children chose, as he put it, "to follow the teachings of Jesus." But he added that any future forays into Christian community for him or his wife would have to differ greatly from the doctrinal inflexibility and relentless guilt that characterized their childhood church experiences. Despite the pain that surrounds his own church experience and his own interest in Buddhist spirituality, this friend continually encourages friends to attend—and also tries to make community connections for—a Christian community I help lead.

My friend's perspective reveals a deep distrust of institutional Christianity and a gentle rejection of the Christian story as the sole resource for truth and meaning. He and his family are open to a diversity of perspectives and relationships. In reaction to our highly individualized society (dominated by individual rights and consumerism), his family exhibits a strong yearning for community. Holism and social activism take prominent roles in their perspectives and family expectations.

The array of values represented by my friend (community oriented, spiritually seeking, politically active, and open to Christianity but suspicious of the institutional church) demonstrates many of the impulses of a new, emerging culture. Social scientists believe the primary worldview of the last several centuries is yielding to a new worldview and culture. The American consciousness is no



longer dominated by a Christian consensus on morality and truth. We're moving from a culture with a single dominant story (the Judeo-Christian metanarrative) to a more heterogeneous "post-Christian" society characterized by numerous, competing stories and rivaling views on ethics and truth.³

While interest in spirituality remains high, persons in this emerging culture look to a variety of sources for spiritual meaning. Their spiritual searches often come with a wide range of prejudices (some accurate, others less so) about historical and institutional Christianity. Sadly, rather than seeing the church as the light of the world, many people in the emerging culture see the church primarily in terms of its grave moral inadequacies.

This emerging culture is shaped by a philosophy known as postmodernism, which encourages the pursuit of truth along new avenues of inquiry. According to theologian John Franke, postmodernity interprets truth and reality with predispositions of "finitude" and "suspicion."⁴ The postmodern mindset tends to reject global, one-size-fits-all-communities-and-contexts explanations of truth. Since the human ability to know truth is finite, postmodern thinkers tend to be wary of any person or institution that offers or demands a universal and infinite view, suspecting such perspectives are often rooted in a desire to control, manipulate, or even do violence to others.

Postmodernism also explains some of the impulses of this emerging culture. Emerging culture persons prefer spiritual worldviews to the mechanistic and scientific explanations of the previous age's modernism. Though individualism remains a hallmark of American society, in the emerging culture the yearning for community is growing, as community experiences are viewed as a source of truth. The individual objectivity of modernism is yielding to a postmodern subjectivity. The postmodern world is one of local communities, contexts, and explanations. It's a world in which experience can trump objectivity and mystery is more comfortable and trustworthy than certainty.

³ Although the U.S. may not experience a post-Christian society to the same measure as Western Europe (we do have a different history), the signs of a post-Christian world are everywhere.

⁴ I am indebted to Franke's work on truth and meaning in postmodernity on numerous counts. Franke offered this characterization in a learning community on "Truth" at the 2005 Emergent Convention in Nashville.



Many see this time of cultural change primarily as a threat to the Christian church. While I believe the growth of the emerging culture requires changes in the church's thinking and practice, I also believe the emerging culture offers a great opportunity for the church to rediscover some of its historical roots and escape some of its contemporary ruts. As we will see, this culture's greater openness and appreciation of mystery can encourage us to embrace our finitude and become more committed to worship an infinite God. It can motivate us to seek God and express the gospel more holistically. We may listen for God's voice in our experiences, with our intuition, through contemplative practices, and from the artistic gifts and experiences of those in our communities. This alone can rescue our view and understanding of God from shallow affirmations and stale—even if they're true—propositions. The emerging culture opens doors of exploration and paths of faithfulness that excite and inspire me. I will make the case that great commitments to community and interdependence can allow us to experience God more fully and to reflect more accurately the character of God within culture and creation.

The emerging culture *will* bring new perils. Any study of the church's journey through history reveals that the dominant cultural perspectives of any era inevitably produce accommodations and contaminations in our understanding and communication of God's character and works. The medieval world shaped a church with mystical superstitions and political entanglements that led to the manipulation and control of an uneducated laity by corrupt elements of the church. The modern world patronized methods of "scientific" biblical interpretation that defanged the Bible of its mystical power and steered our worship toward an overreliance on cognitive study and debate. We should expect challenges similar in weight and threat in the postmodern, emerging culture.

Concerns about the unknown threats the emerging culture may bring for the church can paralyze us. During my more than 20 years of leading cross-cultural international projects with both students and adults, I've always taught that the dangers we face on a daily



basis within the comforts of our own culture are often equal to or worse than the dangers of a new environment. Driving a car every day is far more dangerous than the possibility that a black mamba is hidden in a bush and waiting to strike you while you're traveling in Africa.⁵ But we fear the new perils *more* because our patterns of anticipation and reflexes of defensiveness against them have, by definition, not formed into habit.

The postmodern culture does pose certain threats and challenges to the gospel, but I believe we've become numb and even casual toward the threats to the gospel that currently exist in our familiar culture. As I hope to demonstrate, in some cases we've codified and blessed some of these threats in the life of the church. For these reasons, I eagerly embrace the church's journey into the emerging culture.

AN EARNEST JOURNEY: THE EMERGING CHURCH

In the midst of this time of cultural transition, a new expression of Christian community is taking shape, one that many call "the emerging church." The emerging church has garnered rising media coverage and public attention in recent years—enough to launch conferences and publishing lines, inspire a growing number of excited devotees, motivate curious leaders seeking to understand its attractions and replicate its model, and galvanize a growing critique and concern.⁶ Since it has been my privilege to be a part of these conversations for more than a decade, it's only fair that I share some of my own thoughts and prejudices about the emerging church.

The first question that is typically posed about this new movement surrounds its definition: *What is the emerging church?* While the desire for a definition is understandable, it's the wrong place to start. In many ways the emerging church defies definition. That is part of its allure for some—and its perceived threat for others.

⁵The black mamba always represented the most frightening and dangerous creature in our frequent travels to the continent of Africa. Thanks to the many excellent wildlife documentaries on television, the perils of this beautiful and deadly snake were always well-known to the members of our teams, and often took on a mythical quality.

⁶For a recently published and sharply critical perspective, see D.A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005).



Andrew Jones is a poet/blogger laureate of the emerging church, and his blog has been a consistent voice of its values and passions. He offered this response when a reader asked him to define the emerging church:

I have tried to define it and have failed miserably. My apologies. It may be of some console for you to know that no one else has succeeded in defining it, and some of us have been at it a long time. Maybe that is okay. People in the emerging culture do not really want or need such a definition. And some of us are hesitant to give one, because behind the practices and models of emerging church lies a radically different mindset, value system, and worldview.⁷

Andrew's response is wise and in no way evasive. It simply reveals the significant change in perspective that characterizes the emerging culture. The modern world saw definitions as the beginning point for inquiry and understanding. The postmodern world, with its suspicion of universal definitions, rejects this starting point. One can work endlessly to capture the emerging church in a definition and miss the whole point. Nonetheless, Andrew's reply is helpful in getting a sense of the emerging church and its identity.

One reason the emerging church defies definition is because the churches that embrace this label are not monolithic. There are huge diversities in style, organization, theology, and ministry practice among emerging churches. At a recent national conference for the emergent movement, I was in the hotel lounge listening to a conversation among some musicians from an emerging church. Although they appreciated the music at the event, they were quite certain this style of music wouldn't fit well into their own context. And the differences go beyond artistic style. As I've visited various emerging church settings, I've seen a wide range of perspectives on the role of women in the church, reliance on historic theological systems, political leanings, the understanding and practice of the sacraments, church organization, and so much more.

⁷ Weblog post "Emerging Church Definition 1.0", (February 2, 2004): http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2004/02/emerging_church.html



Clearly, the diversity one finds among emerging churches precludes simple generalizations. We should expect that some emerging churches might cross the boundaries of wisdom, propriety, and orthodoxy. We should expect others to find missional paths in the emerging culture that rightfully challenge the ministry trajectory of existing churches. We should also anticipate significant differences among various emerging congregations, as well as areas of surprising continuities with the historic church and more established congregations.

The diversity within the emergent movement also means there is no single model for existing churches to replicate in seeking to transition into emerging culture ministry. Surely existing congregations can learn much from emerging congregations. But there is no single pattern or “system” for a church to follow to minister effectively in our changing culture. Different contexts will require different ministry expressions.

Growing up in North Carolina, I was a huge fan of Coach Dean Smith and his basketball teams at the University of North Carolina. I remember how his familiar nasal twang would bristle in postgame interviews when he was asked about “the Carolina system.” His answer was always some version of the following: North Carolina did not have a “system.” The players were not locked into some stiff framework that prevented creativity and demanded rote responses to specific game situations. Basketball has far too much complexity for such a method to succeed. Instead, there was a philosophy of play—oriented around principles of effort, unselfishness, and smart decision-making—that was employed creatively within the infinite number of possibilities in any college basketball game.

Coach Smith’s retort offers a helpful direction in understanding the emerging church. There is no single model for the theology and practices followed by all emerging churches. But, as Andrew Jones has suggested, the mindsets, values, and perspectives that characterize emerging churches differ from the more systemic and doctrinal approaches of most existing, modern churches.



The emerging church seeks to be an authentic contextualization of the gospel within the values and characteristics of postmodern culture. Therefore, it envisions and expresses Christianity primarily as a way of life, rather than an adherence to a doctrinal system or organizational pattern. This doesn't mean the emerging church is devoid of doctrinal affirmations or structure, but the theological systems or specific ministry models are not the defining factors. Instead, emerging churches are committed to a "rule of life" that includes:

- The pursuit of the gospel expressed and explained in community
- A passion for living out the values of Jesus' kingdom in the present
- Comfort with mystery and uncertainty
- A spiritual holism that calls forth a radical and comprehensive discipleship
- A reading of Scripture that intersects with local stories and contexts
- An experiential approach to both worship and the pursuit of truth
- A ministry that honors the beauty of God's creation and the creative spirit found in humanity⁸

Perhaps most of all, the emerging church is a missional church. By "missional," I mean that the emerging church seeks to be a community that embodies and supports God's mission of establishing a present and future redemptive kingdom.

To a certain extent, this identity is reactive and critical—an alternative to the resource-heavy, needs-based programs of many contemporary churches. But much of the emerging church's identity is creatively generative. It desperately seeks to embody God's agenda in a changing, post-Christian environment where the aging theological constructs and methodologies of a once-dominant religious institution no longer connect as cohesively as they once did.

⁸ Throughout the following chapters, these characteristics will be fleshed out as I use the passions of the emerging church as a guide for the church's transition.



I must confess I have concerns about the term “emerging church.” The “emerging church” label is rapidly becoming the brand name for a popular style of ministry. I talk to many persons who are eager to do “emerging church ministry” without any understanding of the cultural context that breeds the necessity of this ministry or the theological/philosophical developments that inform its practices. Understood in this way, the emerging church can appear to be no more than a new and faddish method divorced from its historical and theological roots.

Discussion about the missional nature of the emerging church can also be offensive to missional Christians from other eras. After a dialogue in our congregation about an emerging church initiative, I was shocked to see a friend and kindred spirit become visibly frustrated. This friend later commented, “‘Emerging church’ makes it sound like someone just invented these values or cornered the market on creativity.” Our church, like many others, has a long history of remarkable creativity, and our efforts to minister effectively in a changing cultural context are not just “emerging” in the present. I concede that this language has its limits and will likely change as the emerging church becomes more established.

As we press forward in this conversation about the church in the emerging culture, I hope two things will be clear. First, I hope you’ll see that the emerging church greatly values its relationship with historical expressions of Christianity, both distant and recent. I don’t believe—nor does any emergent church leader I know—that the emergent movement has cornered the market on how to embody the gospel creatively in our changing world. But it’s also true that God is doing “a new thing” in the ministry and life of the emergent movement. Far more than just a trendy shift in Christian expression, the emerging church embodies a profound and exciting change in understanding God’s kingdom and the gospel.



AN INEVITABLE JOURNEY: THE EXISTING CHURCH

As you can see, I have great enthusiasm for the emerging church and its expression of the gospel in the postmodern world. This excitement begs the question of my attitudes, thoughts, and presuppositions related to the existing church.

Church is not a neutral word to me. I bring to any conversation about church a host of personal and professional experiences, a range of prejudices and expectations, and a variety of disappointments and dreams. The church profoundly shaped my childhood. I was blessed to have a wealth of authentic faith and community experiences during my youth; and by the time I was in middle school, I knew I would consider pastoral ministry as a profession. Yet, it's a few moments of intense disappointment with the church I loved that stand out the most in my memory.

Growing up in a rural North Carolina community in the 1960s and 1970s, some of my most painful experiences involved our church community's racism and decisions that were made during the civil rights era. Thanks to the progressive thinking of discerning parents, at an early age I became aware that the Christian community could be disturbingly wrong about cultural issues. I vividly remember my mom's tears when she found out a touring youth choir's visit to our church had been cancelled when our pastor found out the choir had an African-American member. Years later, I learned that my father confronted the pastor over this decision, and some long-time friends in the church never forgave my parents for this confrontation. It remained a source of great pain to my mom right up to the time of her death 10 years later.

By the time I began seminary, I'd had far too many experiences with acts of judgment, fear, ignorance, and isolation—all done in the name of the church and of Christ. At that point, I was studying and training to serve God but not the church. I never expected to work for a church, and I'm certainly not naive about the church's capacity to fail.



But I also have a deep love for the church and a growing optimism about its future. For the past 15 years, I've served as a pastor and elder at the Chapel Hill Bible Church in North Carolina. In this time, I've worked with many people whose spiritual lives have been formed on profound thought, deep compassion, and intense commitment to the gospel Jesus taught and lived. In the culture of this community, materialism has been challenged, hypocrisy avoided, fears confronted, cultural isolation disdained, and graciousness has reigned as a dominant ministry motif. Our congregation is not perfect. Every ministry insider sees the magnitude of human weakness, failure, and sin, as well as the inadequacies of Christian community. Nonetheless, this congregation has wooed me back to a love for the church that was nearly extinguished in my childhood. For this, I will be forever thankful.

The Chapel Hill Bible Church is by no means an emerging church, nor does it seek to become like most emerging churches that have taken shape over the last decade. As a 35-year-old church, our transition into the emerging culture is quite different from fellowships that began with postmodernity as an assumed frame of reference. I don't intend to offer our experiences with navigating the waters of cultural transition as a hardened template for other churches seeking to make the same journey. But our narrative of transition, success, failure, pain, and joy as we've traveled down these waters has influenced every page of this manuscript. The emerging culture conversations within our community have humbled me, helped me understand many of the legitimate fears related to transition, and offered some pathways of generous response to these fears. The willingness of this established church community to hear and dialogue with new thoughts and practices of emerging culture ministry has invigorated my hope for the existing church's ability to transition into this new era.

I believe the existing church is still a viable, needed, and fruitful expression of Christian community in our culture. In other words, I don't think the existing church is a candidate for reformation by extermination. I don't hope for the demise of the existing church.



Like many of Christ's followers, I have many frustrations with the existing church. When I watch certain late-night religious broadcasts, I feel like an uninvited and unwelcome intruder at the scene of an automobile accident. I struggled during the U.S. presidential election of 2004 when the polarities of the Christian community seemed to match our nation's political divisions. I sometimes wonder whether the most politically organized segments of the church have read the whole Bible or just a few prooftexts that affirm their politics.⁹ I cringe when the church insists on practicing any of a variety of cultural anachronisms, baptizing these practices with divine affirmation and thus diminishing the voice of the church in a constantly changing world.

But, inevitably, the moment I lapse into a state of religious self-righteousness and arrogant confidence that proclaims I know something that you don't but should, I'm surprised and appropriately shamed by the depth and quality of the existing church. I am shamed when persons with whom I regularly disagree far exceed my ability or desire to express Christian love in certain situations. I am shamed when these brothers and sisters express care for me even though we don't see eye-to-eye theologically. (Would I have done so had the roles been reversed?) I am constantly surprised and humbled by the creativity, passion, and effectiveness I witness in churches that are not on the cutting edge of the emerging culture conversation.

The existing church continues to serve faithfully the mission and message of Christ in this in-between world of intermingled modern and postmodern cultures. Though I will say much about this emerging culture's demands for transition in the existing church, I never want to lose sight of this assumption.

I also believe that although the church has a natural aversion to change, it also has a long history of effective adaptation to cultural transition. I believe this will continue to be true for the existing church as it confronts the emerging culture.

⁹Even before I read it, I knew I'd love Jim Wallis's book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)



My brother-in-law, Tony Martin, has been a worship pastor in Southern Baptist churches for his whole professional career. Immediately after his graduation from Davidson College, he took a worship ministry position in a small, rural church in North Carolina. He likes to tell how he enthusiastically bounded into the choir room for his first rehearsal and noticed the rather small choir of primarily senior citizens was scattered throughout the room. He urged the choir members to sit closer together so they could hear one another's voices. This suggestion prompted many protests: "No, that's Robert's chair," or "I could never take Nancy's chair." Encouraged by the prospect of a much larger choir, Tony beamed and exclaimed, "I can't wait to meet all these folks! Do you think they'll be here next week?" Sadly, the remaining choir members then explained that Robert, Nancy, and all the other owners of those vacant chairs had "passed on to their reward with the Lord."

This is the image many people have of the church—a collection of dear but inflexible people who save chairs for dead people. For years, I attended emerging church gatherings where little hope was expressed for the existing church. And as we look at the memorial plaques and stained-glass windows of historic church buildings or hear outdated practices justified by an omnipresent "that's just the way we do things here," it's easy to assume the church never changes. But I sense this tone changing for two reasons.

First, even a cursory study of church history reveals that the church eventually adapts to cultural change. This change can be frighteningly slow and with many embarrassments along the way—see the flat earth theory, monkey trials, and support of slavery for evidence. Nevertheless, the unique blessing of the presence of God's Spirit in the church assures eventual changes in the direction of God's mission. The church has crossed great divides such as the Jewish/Gentile debate in the early church and the frightening challenges of the Renaissance and scientific revolution. It will also respond to the challenges of our changing cultural context.



Secondly, the emerging culture is already having a profound impact on the existing church. Some measure of transition has begun. The surface evidence includes the growing number of emerging church plants supported by established churches and denominations, the development of alternative services in more traditional churches, and the major media attention directed toward these ministries.¹⁰ But, as I will argue throughout this book, real transition involves more than stylistic change. The greater evidence of transition lies in a new language and conceptualization of ministry in existing churches that runs far deeper than “postmodern” worship services, video cafés, and marketing pieces with “old-school” monastic fonts.

Our church in Chapel Hill offers an example. Being in a university community, our default for spiritual nurture is cognitive, teaching programs. When in doubt, we’ve traditionally created a classroom experience. As we’ve stated, the emerging culture has contributed to a rising interest in experiential spirituality, spiritual holism, and the spiritual practices of historic Christianity. These interests have greatly impacted our nomenclature and programmatic design for spiritual development. Contemplative prayer retreats have become common. Requests for spiritual direction or spiritual directors fill my inbox. And contemplative experiences, such as the Stations of the Cross, now find their way onto our church calendar.

Our emerging culture ministry initiative began with a significant group of “Bible churchers” gathering in my living room at sunrise to pray a morning, liturgical office. We now speak of “spiritual formation”—a term that embraces emerging culture understandings of holism and experience in spiritual growth—rather than “discipleship” (a wonderful term that has been associated with cognitive-only approaches, at least in our tradition). I like to needle a colleague whose job title now includes “spiritual formation,” a phrase that used to make him nervous and uncomfortable because it seemed a bit “liberal” and “vague”!¹¹

¹⁰Although there has been much coverage of the emerging church in major newspapers, network specials, online pieces, and in national periodicals, so far the majority of the coverage has focused on stylistic features like music, worship service design, or the cultural stereotypes of those who attend these ministries.

¹¹One example of this in conservative Christian fellowships (many of which may have concerns about the emerging culture and church) would be the intense support of Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*. This film was deeply influenced by the Stations of the Cross—an ancient Catholic representation of Jesus’ final hours that has been the source for many historical and contemplative prayer experiences, as well as the inspiration of so much art.



I can think of scores of friends who were defensively locked in doctrinal and cultural-avoidance expressions of Christianity in the mid-1990s, but are now eagerly devouring emergent books. One of these friends recently approached me with a copy of Brian McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* under his arm. He pointed to the book and said, "This is the kind of Christianity I want to follow and lead." My dropping jaw prevented even a pithy reply of, "I told you so!" There is little doubt that a transition in the existing church has begun.

This transition is both inevitable and necessary. For the church to thrive in the emerging culture of the present and future, it must embark on this journey. The church will increasingly find that some of its theological conceptions are founded on philosophical premises and cultural conditions that will be deeply marginalized in the future—if they exist at all. As a result, some of the traditional divisions of the church, modes of theological communication, and ministry forms will wane in significance and impact. This doesn't mean an end to our traditions. (I'll take up the fear of losing our traditions later.) But it does mean change lies ahead. For the church to maintain its voice in the emerging culture, transition is necessary.

TRANSITION: A JOURNEY OF MANY PATHS

Although transition is essential, the church's journey into the emerging culture will follow no single path, nor will each congregation arrive at the same destination. The existing church's journey of transition will take many forms and will embrace a variety of goals. While we'll explore the nature of the necessary transitions throughout the book, a few broad areas bear mentioning now.

First, while the church as a whole must transition, not every congregation will or should pursue these new directions. Some churches need to continue in their current paradigm of ministry, either because it has proven successful in their particular context or because the costs of transition are too high at the moment. The



consequences of cultural disconnect for those who ignore or resist the emerging culture will be very real and in some cases increasingly painful. We must recognize that emerging culture transition cannot occur through a midnight takeover of a local congregation that leaves faithful followers lost in a new environment without a working language, compass bearings, or meaningful symbols. The pace of transition should vary widely between churches. Transition to emerging culture ministries will be much easier, more natural, and far more necessary in some communities than others. And some methods and practices will not translate to every community. But along with the opportunities, there will be unexpected costs and casualties in every situation.

Second, I want to stress that I'm not suggesting that the existing churches' goal of transition is to replicate the forms of current emerging churches. Many emerging churches are the product of church-planting endeavors that offer far more freedom and a radically different context than that which faces existing churches. To try to blindly copy these communities—rather than seeking to learn from their passions and organizing principles—is an act of reckless naiveté.

The form that existing churches will take as they transition into the emerging culture is still significantly unknown. Nevertheless, the existing church can learn much from emerging churches, despite their radically divergent contexts. The emerging church can play a prophetic role for established churches, charting the path into new territory. Although the emergent movement did not begin with this goal, this opportunity to guide the existing church into new lands presents itself as a great potential blessing for the emerging church.

Conversely, existing churches have an opportunity to serve as both student and mentor to the emerging church. The emerging church doesn't need to develop in isolation. Instead, the existing church can play a critical role in shaping the future of the emerging church. With the support and blessing of existing churches, the



emerging church can diversify, mature, and avoid some of the mistakes existing churches have made.

Unfortunately, there are already more than enough examples of emerging churches that feel they have cornered the market on creativity or invented the concept of cultural authenticity. At the same time, existing churches have often been far too quick to offer harsh critiques of emerging churches based on their expectations of “success” and theological correctness. Nonetheless, there remains a great opportunity for mutual blessing and partnership between the existing church and the emerging church.

Tyler Jones is the founding pastor of Vintage21, an emerging church with a blossoming ministry in Raleigh, North Carolina. A gifted, former staff member of a campus ministry, Tyler has often stated how much he appreciates having an opportunity to “talk shop” with leaders from established churches with a far longer history than his own fellowship. As I’ve traveled and networked in the emergent community, I constantly find this attitude among both younger and older leaders in the emerging church.

The results of the collaboration between existing and emerging churches can be quite special. Many existing congregations have thrived amidst cultural changes that have demanded huge risks and startling creativity. And, of course, there is no substitute for experience. While there may be huge differences in the worship gatherings, thought patterns, and goals between existing and emerging churches, there are certainly realities of “church” that transcend these differences.

Recently, I was interviewing leaders in emerging church settings about ministry models that involved church collaboration with entrepreneurial businesses. The emerging church’s desire to partner with the business world stands in marked contrast to the more compartmentalized modern culture, which has sought to maintain a firewall between the business world and the church community. While our congregation has been heavily shaped by the modern



compartmentalization of church and business, we are also located in a university town. Thus, we've experienced numerous occasions where a professor in our fellowship has taken some research or creation to the market, often employing others in our church community in the process. Some of these ventures have succeeded; others have failed, leading to job loss and potential brokenness in our fellowship. Through careful communication, reconciliation, and pastoral care, our congregation has navigated and survived the perilous waters of failed business ventures and even the jealousy of successful businesses. This is just one example of how the emergent church might learn from the storehouse of experiences of the existing church, even in areas where there might be significant differences of philosophy and practice.

Finally, let me close this chapter with a word about the relationship between theology and methodology in the emerging culture ministry. There are many who'd like to think the existing church's transition into effective ministry in the emerging culture will involve nothing more than the utilization of some creative, new worship styles and ministry methods. As I will stress throughout the book, I firmly believe the church's authentic journey into the emerging culture must involve transitions in both thought and practice.

I had a balding university professor who would part what little hair he had just above one ear and comb it over the top to create the illusion of a full head of hair. When he would bend over the podium, his large lecture classes would inevitably simmer in snickers and chuckles as his "secret hair restoration method" was revealed. He was simply a bald guy pretending to have a full head of hair. Churches that seek to copy the practices and methods of emerging church ministry without simultaneously pursuing the dialogue of transition in thought are very likely to exhibit the inauthenticity of a really bad comb-over. The practices do not make sense without the theology.

The relationship of thought to practice in the emerging culture is reciprocal. The thought and practice inform each other; each can



look quite foolish alone.¹² This obvious and essential point is so often lost in our driving pragmatism to embrace—or reject—new methods. I will come back to this point again and again as we examine the theological dialogues and practices of transition. This is, without a doubt, one principle of transition that must not be ignored or forgotten.

With that said, we turn now to thought and theological issues that are foundational and instrumental to church transition. Our lens in examining these matters is a series of fears that can derail essential dialogues of theological transition.

¹²This is true for the relationship of thought to practice in every era. The practices of worship and spiritual nurture for the modern church were formed and informed by the epistemology and philosophy of the Enlightenment and the modern era.